



NUMBER 3 • 50c

# Great Science Fiction Stories

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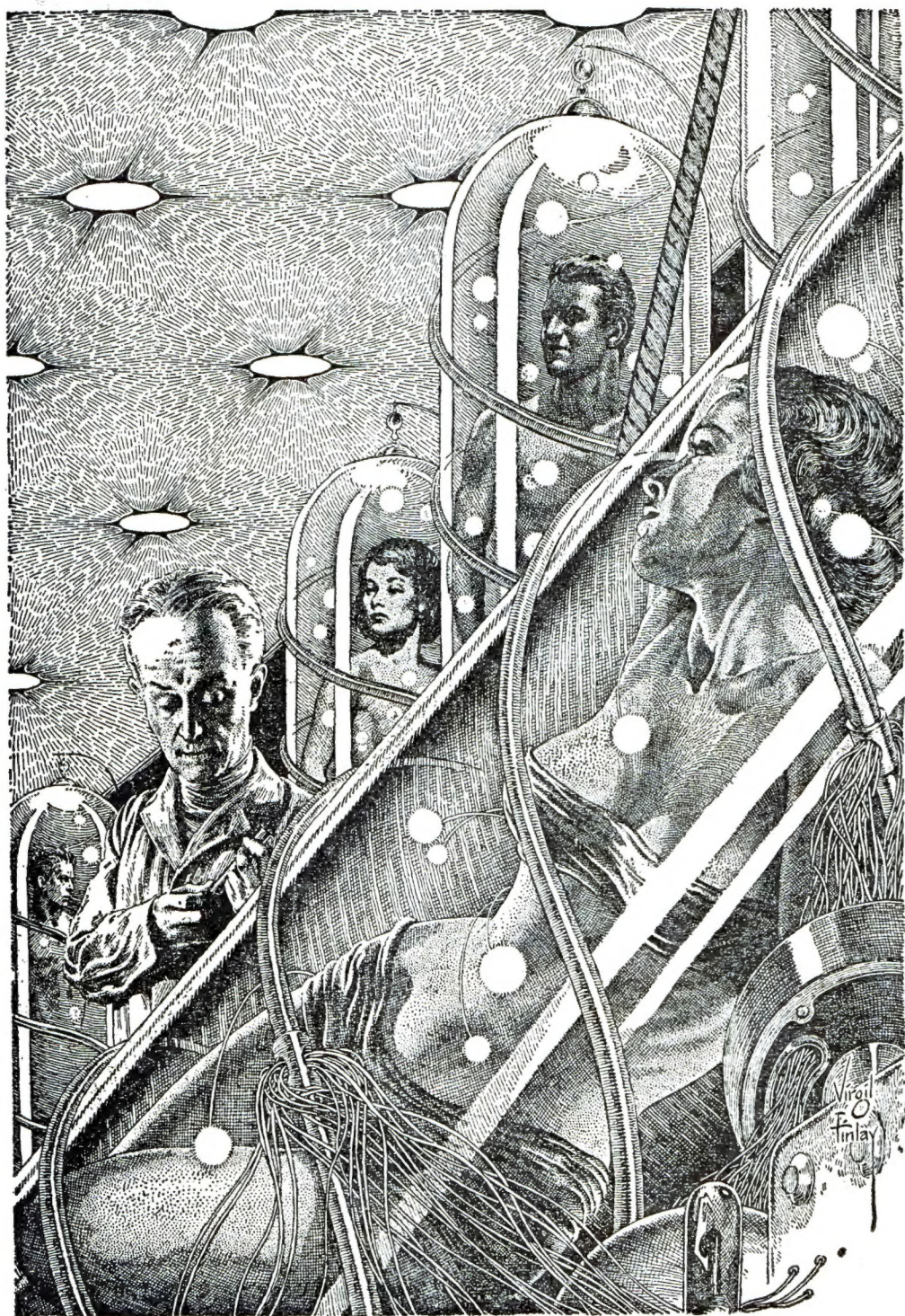
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# Great Science Fiction Stories

NUMBER 3

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# THE BY LEIGH BRACKETT TRUANTS

1

*The farmhouse was tall and white. For eighty-three years it had stood in the green countryside where the shaggy Pennsylvania hills slope down to the meadows of Ohio. It was a wise house and a kindly one. It knew all there was to know of the wheeling seasons, birth and death, human passion, human sorrow.*

*But now something had come into the night that it did not know. From the starry sky it came, a sound and presence not of the Earth. The house listened and was afraid...*

**P**RELUDE to nightmare. Hugh Sherwin was to remember very clearly, in the days that followed every second of those last calm precious minutes before his familiar world began to fall about him.

He sat in the old farmhouse living room, smoking and drowsily considering the pages of a dairy equipment catalogue. From outside in the warm May night came a chorus of squeals, yelps and amiable growlings where

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*The flame beings from beyond  
the stars threw everyone  
into a panic — everyone but the  
children who seemed wild about them*

Janie played some complicated game with the dogs.

He remembered that the air was soft, sweet with the smell of the rain that had fallen that afternoon. He remembered the chirping of the crickets. He remembered thinking that summer was on its way at last.

Lucy Sherwin looked up from her sewing. "I swear," she said, "that child grows an inch every day. I can't keep her dresses down to save me."

Sherwin grinned. "Wait another five years. Then you can really start worrying about her clothes."

His pipe had gone out. He lit it again. Janie whooped with laughter out on the lawn. The dogs barked. Lucy went on with her sewing.

Sherwin turned the pages of the catalogue. After a time he realized, without really thinking of it, that the sounds from outside had stopped.

The child, the dogs, the shrilling crickets, all were silent. And it seemed to Sherwin, in the stillness, that he heard a vast strange whisper hissing down the sky.

A gust of wind blew sharp and sudden, tearing at the trees. The frame of the old house quivered, and Lucy said, "It must be going to storm."

Janie cried, "Daddy! Daddy! Come quick!"

Sherwin groaned. "Oh, Lord," he said. "What now?" He leaned over and called through the open window. "What do you want?"



"Come here, Daddy!"

Lucy smiled. "Better go, dear. Maybe she's found a snake."

"Well, if she has she can let it go again." But he rose, grumbling, and went out the door, snapping on the yard light.

"Where are you, Janie? What is it?"

He heard her voice from the far side of the yard, where the light did not reach. He started toward her. The dogs came running to him, a brace of lolloping spaniels and a big golden retriever. They panted happily. Sherwin called again.

"Jane!"

She did not answer. He had passed out of the light now but there was part of a moon and presently he saw her, a thin intense child with dark hair and very blue eyes, standing perfectly still and staring toward the west.

She said breathlessly, "It's gone now, down in the woods."

Sherwin followed her intent gaze, across the little creek that ran behind the house and the great white dairy barn, across the wide meadow beyond it, and farther still to the woods.

The thick stand of oak and maple and sycamore covered acres of marshy bottomland too low for pasture. Sherwin had never cleared it. The massed darkness of the trees lay silent and undisturbed in the dim moonlight. The crickets had begun to sing again.

"What's gone?" demanded Sherwin. "I don't see anything."

"It came down out of the sky," Janie said. "A big dark thing, like an airplane without any wings. It went down into the woods."

"Nonsense. There haven't been any planes around and if one had crashed in the woods we'd all know it."

"It didn't crash. It just came down. It made a whistling noise." She all but shook him in her excitement. "Come on! Let's go see what it is!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jane! That's ridiculous. You saw a cloud or a big bird. Now forget it."

HE started back to the house. Janie danced in the long grass, almost weeping.

"But I saw it! I saw it!"

Sherwin said carelessly, "Well, it'll keep till tomorrow. Go down and make sure the gate's locked where the new calf is. The cow has been thinking about getting back to the pasture."

He had locked the gate himself but he wanted to get Janie's mind off her vision. She could be very insistent at times.

"All right," she answered sulkily. "But you wait. You'll see!"

She went off toward the pen. Sherwin returned to his catalogue and his comfortable chair.

An hour later he called her to go to bed and she was gone.

He hunted her around the barn and outbuildings, thinking she might have fallen and been hurt, but she was not there. The dogs too were missing.

He stood irresolute and then a thought occurred to him and he looked toward the woods. He saw a tiny gleam of light—a flashlight beam shining through the black fringes of the trees.

Sherwin went down across the creek into the meadow. The dogs met him. They were subdued and restless and when he spoke to them they whined and rubbed against him.

Janie came out from the pitch darkness under the trees. She was walking slowly and by the torchbeam Sherwin saw that her face was rapt and her eyes wide and full of wonder. There was such a queer breathless hush about her, somehow, that he checked his first angry words.

She whispered, "They came out of the ship, all misty and bright. I couldn't see them very well but they had wings, beautiful fiery wings. They looked like angels."

Her gaze turned upon him, not really seeing him. She asked, "Do you think they could be angels truly?"

"I think," said Sherwin, "that you're going to get a thrashing, young lady."



He caught her arm and began to march her back across the meadow. "You know perfectly well that you're forbidden to go into the woods after dark!"

She wasn't listening to him. She said, in the same odd distant voice, "Do you think they could be, Daddy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Them. Could they be angels?"

"Angels!" Sherwin snorted. "I don't know why angels should turn up in our woods and if they did they wouldn't need a ship to fly around in."

"No," said Janie. "No, I guess they wouldn't."

"Angels! If you think you can excuse yourself with a story like that you're mistaken." He quickened the pace. "March along there, Miss Jane! My palm is itching."

"Besides," murmured Janie, "I don't think angels laugh—and they were laughing."

Sherwin said no more. There seemed to be nothing more to say.

He was still baffled at the end of a stormy session in the living room. Jane clung stubbornly to her story, so stubbornly that she was on the verge of hysterics, and no amount of coaxing, reasoning or threatened punishment could shake her. Lucy sent her sobbing off to bed.

"I can't understand the child," she said. "I've never seen her like this before."

Sherwin shrugged. "Oh, kids get funny streaks sometimes. She'll forget it."

He had forgotten it himself by morning. He saw Janie go off to school with Richard Allerton, the boy from the neighboring farm. They always walked together, trudging the half mile into the village. Janie was chattering sixteen to the dozen and now and again she whirled about in a sort of dance, holding out her arms like wings.

Toward noon Lucy called him in from the barn. "Miss Harker just phoned," she told him. "She wanted to know if Janie had come home."

Sherwin frowned. "You mean she isn't in school?"

"No—not after recess. Miss Harker said a number of children were missing. Hugh, I'm worried. You don't suppose—?"

"Nonsense. The little devil's playing hooky, that's all." He said angrily, "What's got into the kid all of a sudden, anyway? All that cutting up last night—hey!" He turned and looked at the woods.

After a moment he said, "I'll bet that's it, Lucy. I'll bet she's taken her pals down to look at the 'angels'."

Lucy said anxiously, "I wish you'd go and see."

"That," said Sherwin, "is exactly what I'm going to do—right now!"

THE dogs came with him, chasing each other merrily after imaginary rabbits. But when he reached the edge of the wood they stopped and would come no farther.

He remembered that they had not gone in with Janie the night before and he could not understand what was the matter with them. The woods were full of small game and normally the dogs spent half their time there, hunting by themselves.

He called, whistled and swore but they hung back, whimpering. Finally he gave up and went on alone, shaking his head.

First his child, now his dogs—everything seemed to have gone queer.

The day was leaden, heavy with the threat of rain. Under the thick-laced branches of the trees it was almost as dark as though it were night. The air was moist, dank with the smell of the marshes. Sherwin forced his way through the undergrowth. From time to time he shouted Janie's name.

Once, some distance away, he thought he heard a chorus of voices, the shrill laughter of a number of children. But the trees clashed and rustled in the wind so that he could not be sure—and Janie did not answer his call.



Gradually, creeping in some secret way along the channels of his nerves, the realization came to him that he was not alone.

He began to move more slowly, looking about him. He could see nothing and yet his heart pounded and the sweat turned cold on his body. Presently he stopped. The dark woods seemed to close around him, a smothering weight of foliage. He called again once or twice, quite sharply. And then he caught a flicker of motion among the trees.

He thought at first that it was the child, hiding from him, and that he had glimpsed her dress moving. But as he went toward it there was a subtle stirring in the underbrush that was never made by human feet. And as the green fronds were disturbed he saw a muted flash of fire and *something*, large and misty and glowing bright, darted swiftly through the lower branches. The leaves were shaken and there was a sound as of wings.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of it. He was not sure of anything about it, its shape, size or substance. He knew only that it was not Earthly.

Sherwin opened his mouth but no cry came. Speechless, breathless, he stood for a moment utterly still. Then he turned and bolted.

## II

SHERWIN had not gone very deep into the woods. Within a few minutes he came plunging out into the open meadow and fetched up in the midst of part of his dairy herd. The cows went lumbering away in alarm and Sherwin stopped, beginning to be ashamed of himself.

He turned to look back. Nothing had followed. The dogs sighted him—he had come out of the trees lower down, toward Allerton's land—and ran to greet him. He patted their rough reassuring bodies with a shaking hand and as his brief panic left him he became angry.

"It was only a trick of light among the trees," he told himself. "A wisp of ground fog, with the sun touching it."

But there was no sun, no fog either.

He had seen something.

He would admit that. His pride forced him to admit it. That he should take to his heels in his own woods...! But his mind, which he had found adequate for forty years of successful living, began to function normally, to reject the impossible thing it had thought such a short time before.

The thing had startled him, the stealthy movement, the sudden glowing flash. That was why he had—imagined. Some great tropical bird, strayed far north, hiding frightened in the unfamiliar woods, rocketing away at his approach. That was what he had seen. That had been Janie's 'angel.' A big, strange bird.

His mind was satisfied. And yet his body trembled still and some inner sense told him that he lied. He ignored it. And he started only slightly when a man's voice hailed him loudly from across the meadow.

He turned to see Allerton approaching. The man was like a large edition of his son, stocky, sunburned, with close-cropped head. Sherwin could see on his face all the signs of a storm gathered and ready to break.

"Saw you down here, Hugh," said Allerton. "Is Rich at your place? The teacher says he's cut school."

Sherwin shook his head. "Jane's up to the same tricks. I'm pretty sure they're in the woods, Sam. Jane found something there last night—"

He hesitated. Somehow his tongue refused to shape any coherent words.

Allerton demanded impatiently, "Just what do you mean, she found something?"

"Oh, you know how kids are. They run a high fever over a new kind of bird. Anyway, I'm sure they're in there. I heard them awhile ago."

"Well," said Allerton, "what are we



waiting for? That boy of mine has got some questions to answer!"

He started off immediately. Sherwin fought down a great reluctance to go again into the shadows under the trees and followed.

"Which way?" asked Allerton.

"I don't know," Sherwin said. "I guess we'll just have to call them."

He called. Both men called. There was no answer. There was no sound at all except the wind in the treetops.

Shouting at intervals the names of their children the men went deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. In spite of himself Sherwin started nervously now and again when the branches were shaken by a sharper gust, letting the gray daylight flicker through. But he saw nothing.

After a long time they splashed through an arm of the swamp and scrambled up onto a ridge covered with a stand of pines. Allerton halted and would go no farther.

"Blast it, Hugh, the kids aren't in here! I'm going back."

But Sherwin was bent forward, listening. "Wait a minute. I thought I heard—"

The tall pines rocked sighing overhead. And then, through the rustle and murmur of the trees there came a burst of laughter and the cries of children busy with some game.

Sherwin nodded. "I know now where they are. Come on."

He scrambled down the far side of the ridge, heading south and west. There was a knoll of higher ground where some ancient trees had fallen in a winter's storm, carrying the lighter growth with them. The children's voices had come from the direction of the clearing.

He went perhaps a hundred yards and then paused, frowning. He began to work back and forth in the undergrowth, growing more and more perplexed and somehow frightened. The heavy gloom melted away oddly between the trees and his vision seemed blurred.

"I can't find the clearing," he said. "You've missed it. You took the wrong direction."

"Listen, these are my woods. I know them." He pointed. "The clearing should be ahead there but I can't see it. Look at the tree trunks, Sam. Look how they shimmer."

Allerton grunted. "Just a trick of the light."

Sherwin had begun to shiver. He cried out loudly, "Jane! Janie, answer me!"

**H**E began to thrash about in the underbrush and as he approached the strangely shimmering trees he was overcome by dizziness and threw his arm across his eyes.

He took a step or two forward blindly. Suddenly almost under his feet there was a crackle and a swish of something moving in haste, a sharp, breathless giggle.

"Hey!" said Allerton. "Hey, that's Rich!"

He plunged forward angrily now, yelling, "Richard! Come here, you!" As he came up beside Sherwin he too was stricken with the queer giddiness. The two men clung to each other a moment and there came a squeal of laughter out of nowhere and the voice of a little girl whispering.

"They look so funny!"

Sherwin moved back carefully until he and Allerton were out of the space where the light seemed so oddly distorted. The dizziness left him immediately and he could see clearly again. A sort of desperate calm came over him.

"Jane," he called. "Will you answer me? Where are you?"

He heard her voice—the teasing impish voice of a child having a wonderfully good time.

"Come and find me, Daddy!"

"All right," he said. "I will."

There began an eerie game of hide and seek.

The children were close at hand.



The men could hear them plainly, the giggling and muffled whispers of a number of boys and girls, but they were not to be seen or found.

"They're hiding behind the trees in the undergrowth," said Allerton. He was angry now, thoroughly angry and baffled. He planted his feet, refusing to hunt any more. He began to roar at Richard.

"You've got to come out sometime," he shouted, "and the sooner you do, the better it'll be for you." He held up his wristwatch. "I'll give you just two minutes to show up!"

He waited. There was a great whispering somewhere. A small boy's voice said scornfully, "All right, scairdy-cat! Go on."

Richard's voice mumbled something in answer and then Richard himself appeared, oddly as though he had materialized out of the empty space between two maples. He shuffled slowly up to his father.

Allerton grabbed him. "Now, then, young man! What are you up to?"

"Nothing, Pa."

"What's going on here? Who's with you?"

"I don't know. I was just—playing."

"I'll teach you to play games with me," said Allerton and laid on. Richard howled.

Without warning, from out of nowhere, terrifyingly bright and beautiful in the shadowy darkness, two misty shapes of flame came rushing.

Sherwin caught a glimpse of Allerton's face, stark white, his mouth fallen open. Then the men were enveloped in a whirling of fiery wings.

This time there was no doubt. The creatures were not birds. They were not anything Sherwin had ever seen or dreamed of before. They were not of this world.

A chill of absolute horror came over him. He flung up his hands to ward the things away and then the buffeting of the flaring pinions drove him to his knees. The wings were neither flame nor fire but flesh as solid as his own.

The brightness was in their substance, a shining of inner light. But even now, close as they were, he could not see the creatures clearly, could not tell exactly the shape of their bodies.

Tiny lightnings stabbed from them at the men. Allerton yelled in mingled pain and panic. He let go of Richard and the boy fled away into the undergrowth. A chorus of frightened cries rose out of the blankness among the trees and Janie's voice screamed, "Don't you hurt my Daddy!"

A last rough thrashing of the wings, a final warning thrust of the queer small lightnings and the things were gone. A great silence descended on the woods, broken only by furtive rustlings where the unseen children crept away. Allerton stared at his hand, which showed a livid burn across the back.

Presently he raised his head. Sherwin had never seen a man so utterly shaken.

"What were they?" he whispered.

SHERWIN drew a deep, unsteady breath. The beating of his heart rocked him where he stood. He tried several times before he could make the words come.

"I don't know. But they want the kids, Sam. Whatever they are they want the kids."

"Richard," said Allerton. "My boy!" He caught Sherwin's arm in a painful grasp. "We've got to stop those things. We've got to get help!"

He went away, crashing like a bull through the underbrush, tearing at the branches that impeded him. Sherwin followed. After what seemed an eternity he saw gray daylight ahead and the open field.

"Sam," he said, "wait a minute. Who are we going to ask for help? Who's going to believe us?"

"I'm going to call the sheriff and he blasted well better believe me!"

"He won't," said Sherwin heavily. "He'll laugh in your face. What are you going to tell him, Sam? Are you going to say you saw angels or devils



or things that came out of the sky in a ship you can't find and can't see?"

Allerton's jaw set hard. "I'm going to try anyway. I'm not going to let *Them* get hold of my kid!"

"All right," Sherwin said. "My place is closer. Use my phone."

He ran beside Allerton across the meadow but he was dreadfully afraid and without hope.

Lucy was waiting in the yard. She gave a little scream when she saw their faces and Sherwin said sharply, "Jane's all right. Go ahead and make your call, Sam. I'll wait here."

He put his arm around Lucy. "The kid's perfectly safe this time. But—"

*How to say it, even to your own wife? How to tell her without sounding insane even to yourself?*

"Listen, Lucy, there's some kind of—animal in the woods. I don't know what it is yet. Something mighty queer. Janie mustn't go in there again, not for one minute. You've got to help me watch her."

He was still evading her questions when Allerton came out again, red-faced and furious.

"He didn't believe a word of it. He told me to get off the bottle." Something desperate came into Allerton's eyes. He sat down on the steps. "We've got to think what we're going to do. If it was fall we could burn the woods."

"But it isn't fall," said Sherwin quietly, "it's spring. The kids are coming now. I'm going to talk to them."

A raggle-taggle of small forms had appeared among the fringe of trees. They dispersed in various directions and Richard and Jane came on alone toward the house. They walked very close together, bent over some object that Jane held in her hands.

"Yes," said Sherwin. "they're the only ones that can help us. Let me handle this. I don't want them frightened off."

The children came on, slowly and reluctantly now that they saw their parents waiting. They had straightened

up rather guiltily and stepped apart a little and Sherwin noticed that Janie now held one hand behind her back.

Her face had a peculiar expression. It was as though she looked with pity upon adults, who had got somehow far beneath her—so far that even their laws and punishments could not affect her much. "What have you got there, Jane?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"May I have it, please?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated, her chin set stubbornly, and then she said, "I can't Daddy. *They* made it for me, for my very special own. It won't even work unless I want it to."

Sherwin felt a chill contraction of the nerves. He held his voice steady.

"Who are *They*?"

"Why, *Them*," she said, and nodded toward the woods. "I found *Them*, you know. I was first. That's why *They* gave me the present." Suddenly she burst out, "Daddy, *They* didn't mean to frighten you just now. *They're* sorry *They* burned Mr. Allerton's hand. *They* thought he was hurting Richard."

Lucy, whose face had grown quite pale, was on the verge of speaking. Sherwin gave her a stern look and said to the child. "That's all right, Janie. May I see your present?"

Still doubtful, but very proud, she extended her hand. In it was a flat smooth oval of the clearest crystal Sherwin had ever seen.

"Lean over, Daddy. There, like that. Now watch. I'm going to make it work."

She placed her hands in a certain way, holding the crystal between them.

At first he could see nothing but the reflection of the cloudy sky. Then, slowly, the crystal darkened, cleared. . .

### III

THE Ohio farmland vanished, forgotten. Sherwin bent closed over the uncanny thing held in the hands of his child.



He was looking at another world.

Pictured small and far-away in the tiny oval, he glimpsed a city built all of some glassy substance as pure and bright as diamond, half veiled in a misty glory of light.

The high slim towers swam in a sort of lambent haze, catching soft fire from the clouds that trailed their low-hung edges over them, rose and purple and burning gold. Above in the glowing sky two suns poured out muted, many-colored lights as of an eternal sunset.

And through that shining city that was never built for human kind shackled to the land, flame-winged creatures soared—creatures large and small, coming and going between the diamond spires.

As from a remote distance Sherwin heard Janie's voice, wistful and eager. "It's where They live, Daddy, way off in the sky. Isn't it just like fairyland? And look at this!"

The scene shifted as she spoke. Sherwin looked into a nightmare gulf of black and utter emptiness. He seemed to be racing through it at incredible speed, watching the red and green and yellow stars go plunging and streaming past.

"It's what They saw on Their way! Oh, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?"

It was the tone of the child's voice, far more than the unearthly vision in the crystal, that sent the pang of fear like a knife into Sherwin's heart. He reached out and struck the thing from her hands, and when it fell he kicked it away in the long grass. Before she could cry out her anguish he had caught her fast.

"What do They want with you?" he demanded. "Why do They give you things to tempt you? *What do They want with you?*"

"They only want to be friends!" She pulled free of his grasp, her eyes blazing with tears and anger. "Why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to spoil everything? They haven't hurt anybody. They haven't done a thing wrong. They gave me a better present

than anybody *ever* gave me before and now you've gone and broken it!"

She would have hunted for the crystal but Sherwin stopped her. "Go to your room, Jane. Lucy, go with her. Try to get her calmed down."

Looking at his daughter's white rebellious face, Sherwin felt that he had blundered badly. He had roused her antagonism where he wanted to help. But the unhealthy excitement in her voice had frightened him. He had not realized that Their hold on her was already so strong.

With full force the realization of what he had seen in the evil little toy came over him. He was not an imaginative man. He had never before looked up at the sky and shuddered, thinking what lay beyond it. He felt suddenly naked and defenseless, very small before huge unknown powers. Even the green familiar land did not comfort him. *They* were in the woods. And if *They* could come, then there were no barriers against anything.

He saw Allerton scuffling about in the grass. Presently he found what he was looking for and stamped it methodically to bits under his heavy boots.

"I saw into it too," he said, "over your shoulder. I don't know what kind of devilment it is but it's no fit thing to have around."

*Thud, thud*, went the great earth-caked boots. Richard was crying.

"They thought pictures into it," he said. "They were going to make me one too." He glared at his father, and at Sherwin. "Janie's right. You just want to be mean."

Allerton finished his task and went to Richard. There was something almost pathetic in his expression.

"Rich," he said, "did They promise you anything else? Did They ask you to do anything?"

Richard shook his head, looking sulky and mulish, and Sherwin could not tell whether or not the boy was holding back.

"Can They talk to you, Rich?"

"Uh-huh."



"How?"

"I don't know. You can hear Them, sort of, inside your head. They can make you see pictures too, anything They want you to see. Stars and comets and all kinds of funny places with funny-looking people and animals and sometimes no people at all."

His round tear-streaked face was taking on that same remote, rapt look that had upset Sherwin so in Janie. He whispered, "I'd sure like to ride in that ship, right across the sky. I'll bet it goes faster than a jet plane. I'd go to all those places and get a lot of things nobody ever saw before and then I'd—"

He broke off in the middle of a dream. Allerton had caught him by the arm.

"You're not going anywhere but home," he said. "And I'll lock you in, if I have to, to keep you there." His eyes met Sherwin's. "See you later, Hugh."

He took the boy away down the road. Sherwin went into the house. He locked the door behind him and loaded his shotgun and set it by. Then he sat down and put his head in his hands and listened dully to the beating of his own heart and wondered.

**L**UCY came downstairs. "I gave her some aspirin," she said. "She's sleepy now." She sat on the floor at Sherwin's feet and put her arms around his waist. "Hugh, you've got to tell me what's going on!"

He told her slowly, past caring whether she believed him or not.

"Sam and I both saw Them. I thought They were going to kill us, but They only burned Sam's hand. That's why the kids played truant today, to go to Them. There was a whole bunch there, laughing—"

He did not tell Lucy that somehow They had made the children, Themselves and the clearing invisible. Her face was white enough already.

She did not say much. She rose and stood for a moment with her hands

clasped hard together. Then she ran back up the stairs and Sherwin heard the door of Janie's room open and then shut tight.

Toward evening he called Allerton. "I gave Rich a good thrashing," Allerton said. "He's shut in his room and his mother's with him. They'll be all right, Hugh. As long as we watch them the kids will be all right."

His voice did not carry much conviction. Sherwin hung up. He sat in the big chair in the bay window overlooking the woods. He did not turn on the lights. The clouds had broken under the rising wind and the moon threw a pale beam into the high-ceilinged room, touching the ivy wall-paper and the tall white doors. Sherwin waited, as a man waits in dubious refuge, crouched in the chair, trembling from time to time. The silence of the old house was painful in his ears.

He must have dozed, for when suddenly he started up in alarm the moon was gone. And *They* had come out of the woods.

Even through his hatred and his fear Sherwin sensed that *They* were glad to be free of the confinement of the trees. The wind swept strong across the open meadow and *They* rose and swooped upon it, a number of *Them*, their cloudy wings streaking across the rifted stars in wheeling arcs of fire.

He took the shotgun across his knees. His hands were quite steady, but very cold. He watched *Them* and he could not help thinking, *How beautiful They are!*—and he loathed *Them* for their beauty because it was luring his child away from him.

His child, Allerton's child—the children of the farms, the village, the other ones who had gone secretly into the woods. What could *They* want with the human children, these creatures from outside? What dreadful game were *They* playing, the bright-winged demons with *Their* hellish toys?

*You can hear them talking inside your head. They can make you see*



*pictures too—anything They want you to see.*

Suppose They could control the minds of the children? What would you do then? How would you fight it?

Tears came into Sherwin's eyes. He sat with the shotgun in his lap and watched Them frolic with the dark sky and the wind and he waited. But They did not come near the house. Suddenly They darted away, high up, and were gone. He did not see Them again that night.

He debated in the morning whether to send Jane to school at all. Then he thought that she would be better there than cooped up brooding in the house, within sight of the woods. He drove her in himself—a silent, resentful little girl with whom he found it difficult to speak—and passed Allerton's car on the road. Both men were taking the same precautions.

They took the children into the small white schoolhouse and spoke to Miss Harker about keeping a careful eye on them. Then the men went home to their work. The day was oppressive and still with great clouds breeding ominously in the sultry air. Sherwin's uneasiness increased as the hours went by. He called the school twice to make sure Jane was there and he was back again a full hour before the last bell, waiting to take her home.

He sat for a time in the car, growing more and more nervous. The leaves of the trees hung utterly motionless. He was drenched with sweat and the heavy humid air was stifling.

A thunderhead gathered in the west, pushing its boiling crest with terrible swiftness across the sky. He watched it spread and darken to the color of purple ink and then the little ragged wisps of dirty white began to blow underneath its belly and the wind came with sudden violence across the land.

He knew it was going to be a bad one. He left the car and went into the schoolhouse. It was already too dark to see inside the building and the lights came on as he pushed open the door

to Janie's classroom. Miss Harker glanced up and then smiled.

"It's going to storm," he said rather inanely. "I thought I'd wait inside."

"Why of course," she answered and pointed out a chair. He sat down. Miss Harker shook her head, remarking on the blackness of the sky. Two boys were shutting the windows. It was very hot and close. Richard and Janie sat in their places but Sherwin noticed that several seats were empty.

"More truancy?" he asked.

Miss Harker peered sternly at the class.

"I'm ashamed of them. They've spoiled a perfect record for attendance and they seem to have infected the whole school. There are several missing from other classes today. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble unless this stops!"

"Yes," said Sherwin. "Yes, I'm afraid there is."

THE first bolt of lightning streaked hissing out of the gloom with thunder on its heels. The little girls squealed. Rain came in a solid mass and then there was more lightning, coming closer, the great bolts striking down with a snarl and a crack. Thunder shook the sky apart and abruptly the lights went out.

Instantly there was turmoil in the dark room. Miss Harker's voice spoke out strongly. The children quieted somewhat. Sherwin could see them dimly, a confusion of small forms milling about, gathering toward the windows. There was a babble of excited whispering and all at once a smothered but triumphant laugh that he knew came from Janie.

Then a positive fury of whispers out of which he heard the words, "Billy said he'd tell Them we couldn't come!"

Sherwin rose. He looked over the crowding heads out the window. A blue-white flare, a crash that made the walls tremble and then he saw the shapes of fire tossing and wheeling in the sky.



They had come into the village under cover of the storm. They were circling the schoolhouse, peering in, and the children knew it and were glad.

"What strange shapes the lightning takes!" said Miss Harker's cheerful voice. "Come away from the windows, children. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

She marshalled them to their seats again and Sherwin clung to the window frame, feeling a weakness he could not control, watching the bright wings play among the blazing bolts.

They did not try to enter the school. They moved away as the storm moved, swooping and tumbling along the road and across the fields, overturning hayricks, putting the frightened cows to flight, ripping slates from the roofs of houses and whirling them on the wind. Even Miss Harker watched, fascinated, and he thought surely she must realize what They were.

But she only said in a rather shaken voice, "I never saw lightning behave like *that* before!"

The flashes grew more distant, the thunder lessened and she sighed. "My, I'm glad *that's* over."

She went back to her desk and began to straighten up the ends of the day's schoolwork. Even the rain had stopped when Sherwin took Janie and Richard out to the car and drove them both home. But the sky was still leaden and fuming and all that afternoon and evening distant storms prowled on the horizon and the air was heavy with thunder.

Sherwin watched his daughter. His nerves were drawn unbearably taut as by long tension growing toward a climax. He smoked his pipe incessantly and started at every flicker of far-off lightning.

Shortly after nine, from the village, there came a sound like the final clap of doom and immediately afterward the trees and even the house itself seemed to be pulled toward the source of the sound by a powerful suction of air.

It was all over in a minute or two. Sherwin ran outside but there was nothing to see except a violent boiling of the clouds.

He heard the phone ring and then Lucy cried out, "Hugh, there's been a tornado in the village!"

Sherwin hesitated briefly. Then he returned to the house and locked Janie carefully in her room and gave Lucy instructions about the doors.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told her. "I've got to see what's happened."

He was thinking of Them, playing in the heart of the storm.

Before he could get his own car out he heard Allerton sound his horn from the road.

"Tornado, huh?" said Allerton. "What it looked like, all right. I figured they might need help. Climb in."

They had no trouble finding the center of damage. There was a crowd already there and growing larger every second, shouldering, staring, making a perfect explosion of excited talk.

The schoolhouse was gone, lifted clean from the foundations.

Sherwin felt a cold and heavy weight within him. He looked at Allerton and then he began to question the men there.

Nothing else had been touched by the freak tornado—only the schoolhouse and that was not wrecked but gone. Several people had seen what they took to be lightning striking all around the building just before it vanished with the clap of thunder and the violent sucking of air.

Sherwin took Allerton by the arm and drew him aside. He told him what he had seen that afternoon.

"They didn't like the school, Sam. It kept the kids away from Them." He stared at the bare foundations, the gaping hole of the cellar. "They didn't like it, so it's gone."

A MAN came running up to the crowd. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, my wife just got a call



from her sister down by the state line. You know what that wind did? It took the schoolhouse clear down there and sat it on a hill, just as clean as a whistle!"

A chill and desperate strength came to Sherwin. "This has got to be stopped, Sam. The devil alone knows what They're up to but it'll be the kids next. I'm going to try something. Are you with me?"

"All the way."

Sherwin fought his way through the crowd. He got to the center of it and began to yell at the men and women until they turned to look at him. A story had come into his head—a wild one but less wild than the truth and he told it to them.

"Listen, while you're all here together! This doesn't have anything to do with the tornado but it's more important. How many of you have had kids playing hooky out of school?"

A lot of them had and said so.

"I can tell you where they're going," Sherwin said. "Down in my woods. There's somebody hiding out in there. Escaped convicts maybe, or men running from the law. They've got the kids bringing them food, helping them out. That's why they're ducking school. Isn't that so, Sam?"

Allerton took his cue. "It sure is! Why, my boy's locked up in his room right now to keep him out of trouble."

The crowd began to mutter. A woman cried out shrilly. Sherwin raised his voice. There was a deadly earnestness about him that carried more conviction than any mere words.

"I'm afraid for my daughter," he said. "I'm afraid for all our children unless we clean those—those criminals out of the woods! I'm going home and get my gun. Do any of you men want to come with me?"

They roared assent. They forgot the freak wind and the vanished schoolhouse. This was something that threatened them and their home and families, something they could fight.

"Call the sheriff!" somebody yelled. "Come on, you guys! I'm not going to have my kids murdered."

"We'll use my house as a starting point," Sherwin told them. "Come as soon as you can."

The men of the village and the nearby farms dispersed, calming their women. Sherwin wondered how they would feel when they learned the truth. He wondered if bullets would kill Them. At any rate, it was something to try, a hope.

Allerton drove him home, racing down the dark road. He dropped Sherwin off and went on to his own place to get his rifle. Sherwin ran into the house. He found Lucy sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Her eyes had a dreadful vacant look. He shook her and it was like shaking a corpse.

"Lucy!" he cried. "Lucy!" He began to slap her face, not hard, and plead with her.

After a bit she saw him and whispered, "I heard a little noise, just a little noise, and I went upstairs to Janie's room. . ."

Tears came then. He left her crying and went with great strides up the stairs. The door to Jane's room was open. He passed through it. The room was in perfect order, except that the northwest corner had been sheared clean away, making a narrow doorway into the night.

The child was gone.

#### IV

HE had looked for Janie's body on the ground below her room. He had not found it. He had known it would not be there. He had given Lucy sedatives and talked her into quietness with words of reassurance he did not feel himself.

Now the men from the village were coming. The cars blocked the drive, formed long lines on the road. The men themselves gathered on the lawn, hefting their rifles and their shotguns



and their pistols, talking in undertones that held an ugly note, looking toward the black woods.

Some of them were afraid. Sherwin knew they were afraid but they were angry too and they were going. They had a peaceful lawful place to live and they were willing to go into the woods by night with their guns to keep it so.

He came out on the steps and spoke to them. "They've taken my daughter," he said. "They came and took her from the house."

They looked at his face in the flare of the yard light and after their first outraged cry they were silent. Presently one said, "I called my kid but I couldn't find him."

There was more than one father then who remembered that he had not seen his child at home. And now they were all afraid but not for themselves. Sherwin went down the steps. "Let's go."

He was halfway across the little bridge when Allerton came running, crying Sherwin's name. "They took Richard," he said. "My boy is gone."

The men poured out across the meadow, going like an army on the march, running in the long grass—running to where the cloudy moon was lost beneath the branches of the trees.

"Head toward the knoll," cried Sherwin. He told them the direction. "I think that's where They are. And be careful of the swamp."

They went in among the close-set trees, laboring through the undergrowth, the beams of their flashlights leaping in the utter dark. Sherwin knew the woods. He rushed on ahead and Allerton clung close behind him. Neither man spoke. Lightning still danced faintly on the horizon and now and again there was a growl of thunder. The mists were rising from the marsh.

Abruptly Sherwin stopped. From behind him came a yell and then the crash and roar of a falling tree. There was silence then and he shouted and a distant voice answered.

"Tree struck by lightning, right in

front of us. No one hurt!"

He could hear them thrashing around as they circled the fallen tree. And then there was a second crash, and another, and still another.

Sherwin said, "It's Them. They're trying to block the way."

Muffled voices swore. The men were trying to scramble out of the trap that had been made for them. Sherwin hurried on, Allerton panting at his side. He could not wait for the men. He could not wait now for anything.

A swoop and a flash of light, an ominous cracking—and ahead a giant maple toppled to the earth, bearing down the younger trees, creating an impassable barrier.

"All right," said Sherwin to an unseen presence. "I know another way."

He turned aside toward the river. In a minute or two he was ankle deep in mud and water, splashing heavily along an arm of the swamp. Reeds and saplings grew thick but there were no trees here to be thrown down against them.

The men went fast, careless of how they trod, and all at once Allerton cried out and fell. He floundered in the muck, trying to rise. Sherwin lifted him up and he would have gone on but he went to his hands and knees again, half fainting.

"I've hurt my ankle. A loose stone—it turned!"

He had lost his rifle. Sherwin got an arm around him and held him up. He was a big man and heavy. It was hard going after that and very slow. Sherwin would have left him but he was afraid that Allerton might faint and drown in the inches of sour water.

The ridge loomed up before them, the tall pines black against a brooding sky. The men staggered out onto hard ground and Sherwin let his burden drop.

"Wait here, Sam. I'm going on alone."

Allerton caught at him. "Look!"

Cloudy wings soared above them, swift as streaming fire and one by one



the tall pines went lordly down, struck by the lightning They carried in Their hands.

The ridge was blocked.

When the night was still again, and empty, Allerton said, "I guess that does it, Hugh. We're licked."

Sherwin did not answer. He remained motionless, standing like an old man, his shoulders bent, his head sunk forward on his breast.

THE earth began to vibrate underneath his feet. A sound, more felt than heard, went out across the woods—deep, powerful throbbing that entered Sherwin's heart and shook it and brought his head up sharply.

"You hear that, Sam?"

"What is it? Thunder?"

"It's machinery," Sherwin whispered. "Motors, starting up."

Unfamiliar motors, so strong and mighty that they could shake the ground and still be silent. *Their* motors. *Their* ship!

"They're getting ready, Sam. They're going to leave. But what about the kids? Sam—*what about Janie and the kids?*"

He turned and fled back into the swamp, along the ridge and around it, and faced a wide expanse of stinking mud and mist. He started out across it.

The marsh quaked beneath him. Going slowly and by day he would have been afraid, wary of the bog-holes and the sucking sands. He did not think of them now. He could not think of anything but that vast and evil thrumming that filled the air, of what it meant to his child—his child, that might have died already, or might be...

He did not know. That was the worst of it. He did not know.

He took a straight line toward the knoll, slipping, floundering, falling now and again and scrambling up, wet to the skin and foul with ooze, but going on, always going on, and at last

there was solid ground under his feet and only a belt of trees between him and the clearing.

They were not looking for him now. They thought he was trapped and helpless, back on the ridge. At least They did not try to stop him. He forced himself to go quietly.

This time he could see the clearing. It crossed his mind that whatever trick They had used before to bend and twist the light-rays around that space so that it could not be seen had depended on some mechanism in the ship, that now They could not spare the power for it.

A dark and monstrous bulk filled more than half the opening. The moon had broken clear, and by its light he could see the metal sheathing of the ship, scored and pitted and worn by unimaginable voyages. The mighty throb of its motors gave it an illusion of life, as though it were anxious to be away again. Sherwin remembered the crystal and the glimpse of streaming Suns and he shuddered, thinking of where this ship had been.

*They* were hovering around an open hatch in the belly of the ship and the children were there also—Janie, Richard, a half dozen more, grouped beside the doorway.

*And Jane was climbing in.*

Sherwin screamed. He screamed her name and ran out across the clearing. He dropped his gun. He could not use it anyway for fear of harming the children and this had gone beyond such things as guns. The child turned and looked at him and then *They* came.

They did not harm him. They held him fast and even now, with Their solid strength binding him, he could see Them only as misty shapes with wings of fire spread against his struggles.

Perhaps the light was different on Their world. Perhaps in the glow of those twin suns They would be as real as he was. But here They were like ghosts, alien phantoms that made him cold with horror.



"Jane!" he cried, "come back! *Come back!*"

Reluctantly she came toward him. "They won't hurt you, Daddy. Don't be scared. Daddy, I want to go with Them. Just for a little while! They'll bring us back. They promised. And I want to go with them—out *there*."

She pointed to where the stars burned clear in the valleys between the clouds.

"I didn't mean to sneak away, Daddy, but I knew you wouldn't let me go and I have to—oh, I *have* to! They came and got me, so I could."

"No," he said. "Oh, *no!*" They were not words so much as a groan of agony. "Listen, Janie, please listen. I'll give you anything you want. I'll buy you a pony, I'll take you clear around the world, I'll do anything."

"But I don't want any of those things, not now."

"Jane," he said, "don't you care anything about your mother and me at all? Do you want to kill us both?"

"I don't see why everybody has to die just because I want to go somewhere!" But she began to cry a little and he shouted to the other children, pleading with them, telling them how their parents felt, trying to make them understand the danger, the enormity of the thing that they were about to do.

Richard looked stubbornly at the ground and said, "We'll never have a chance again. We'll never see those other places out there if we don't go now. I don't care what my father says. I'm going."

One of the little girls said doubtfully, "I'm scared. I think I want to go home."

Some of them began to waver, thinking of the things Sherwin had said. And then Sherwin heard a silent voice speaking within his mind.

He knew that the children could hear it far more clearly than he. Their minds were young and plastic, open wide to all things. But he could hear it well enough.

*What are you afraid of?* it said.

*Come on! There are all sorts of worlds beside this one. We'll show them to you. We'll show you how the stars look, out beyond your sky. We'll teach you how to run the ship. Think of the fun we can have together, all across the galaxy!*

OTHER voices joined in, telling of colored Suns and bright strange planets, of toys and pets and treasures, of adventures unthinkable. Child's talk, couched in the language of children—cunningly wrought to lure them on with promises that set their heads whirling with wonder and delight.

*Suppose you do get punished when we bring you back? Are you going to miss it all just because you're afraid of a little punishment?*

"That's right," said Janie, turning to the others. "Think what *They're* going to catch when They get home and *They're* not afraid. They didn't let *Their* parents stop them!"

"No, sir!" said Richard. "*They* weren't scared."

Slowly, very slowly, Sherwin said, "Their parents? Jane, did you say—*Their* parents?"

"Yes, Daddy. *They* ran away and *They've* had all kinds of fun and haven't got hurt a bit and *They* weren't any older than we are. And if *They* can do it, so can we!"

Parents!

*They ran away, and *They* aren't any older than we...*

Sherwin said nothing for a long moment.

At last he whispered, "Do you mean that *They* are children, too?"

"Why, of course," she answered. "I thought you knew."

Sherwin began to laugh. It was not healthy laughter and he made himself stop it at once.

Children!

The fright, the anguish, the pain of the past two days and nights—a whole village in arms, terrified parents combing the woods for the missing, the aw-



ful dread of the unknown that had beset him and Allerton!

*Children.* Children had done all this!

He looked at Them and he could not believe it. "It's a lie," he said. "It's a lie They've told you to lead you on."

Jane said impatiently, "Don't be silly, Daddy. Why would They want to play with us if They were grown up?"

Children—these unhuman creatures with all their unholy powers. Truant children, like his own!

A queer sort of anger came to Sherwin then and with it a faint and desperate hope. He straightened up and turned to face the two that held him. He told Them sternly, "Let me go!"

They relaxed Their grasp but the others had come closer now.

Sherwin was thinking, *The species doesn't matter, even a lion cub will obey. Maybe—Maybe!*

He spoke to Them. "You're telling our children not to be afraid of punishment. What are your own elders going to say to you when you get back?"

They rustled Their wings and did not answer. "You're being very brave, aren't you? You're just going to go on having fun. Well, I know kids, and I know different. You're afraid. You're afraid to go home!"

Their voices reached him in defiant chorus.

*No! We are not afraid!*

"Oh, yes, you are. You're scared stiff. You've stolen a ship and run away and there'll be the devil to pay about it and you know it."

He stepped toward Them, forcing himself to be stern and assured, the single adult among a group of children, the angry adult asserting his authority.

"If I were you," he told Them, "I'd get home and face the music before you make things any worse. The longer you stay away, the harder it'll be for you. And you might as well know right now, nobody's going with you!"

He turned to his own. "Come here

to me, Jane. The rest of you, get home as fast as you can make it. Your fathers are coming and you know what you'll get if they catch you here!"

He waited. There was nothing more to do but wait. For a moment no one moved nor spoke. The children hung their heads and looked at each other sidelong and it seemed to Sherwin that the wings of the strangers drooped.

Imperceptibly the two groups began to draw apart.

The little girl who had spoken before ran suddenly into the woods, crying. And They commenced to mutter among Themselves.

They were speaking only to each other now and Sherwin could not hear Their thoughts but it seemed that They were quarreling, some hanging back, others arguing with flashing motions of Their wings.

Jane came slowly and stood beside Sherwin. Her eyes were on the earth. She did not raise them.

They began to drift toward the ship. They were not talking now.

They stopped beside the hatchway and looked back. Most of the human children had already melted into the darkness between the trees. Sherwin took Jane's hand and held it. They must have called to her, for she said good-by and They went slowly and gloomily into the ship. The hatchway closed.

Sherwin took his daughter into his arms and carried her away.

Behind him the heavy throbbing deepened and then seemed to rise and fade. Looking upward through a rift in the branches he saw a dark shape sweep out across the stars and vanish, bearing those other children to their homeplace far across the sky.

Janie was crying, her head pressed hard against his shoulder.

A little later he met the other men.

"Whoever was in the woods has gone away," he said. "Everything's all right now and the truants—all of them—are going home."



# THE NAMING OF NAMES

BY RAY BRADBURY



*Something exceedingly strange began happening to the Earthlings stranded on Mars by an unforeseen catastrophe*

**T**HE ROCKET metal cooled in the meadow winds. Its lid gave a bulging pop. From its clock interior stepped a man, a woman, and three children. The other passengers whispered away across the Martian meadow, leaving the man a frightened sentinel over his family.

The man felt his hair flutter and the tissues of his body drawn tight as if he were standing at the center of a sucking vacuum. His wife's body, before him, seemed almost to whirl away, like a smoke drift. The children, small seeds, might at any instant be sown to all the Martian climes.

The children looked up at him, as

people look to the sun, to tell what time of their life it is. His face was like cold milk.

"What's wrong?" asked his wife.

"Let's get back on the rocket."

"Go back to Earth?"

"Yes!"

"Are you afraid of something?"

"Listen!"

The wind blew as if to flake away their identities. At any moment the

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Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone. He felt submerged in a chemical that could dissolve his intellect and eradicate his past.

They looked at Martian hills that time had worn with a crushing pressure of years. They saw the old cities, lost like thin children in their meadows, lying like children's delicate bones among the blowing lakes of grass.

"Chin up, Harry," said his wife. "It's too late. We've come at least thirty-five million miles or more."

The children with their dandelion hair hollered at the deep drone of Martian sky. There was no answer but the racing hiss of wind through the stiff grass.

He picked up the luggage in his cold hands. "Here we go," he said—like a man standing on the edge of a deadly sea, ready to walk in and be drowned.

They marched into town.

**T**HEIR NAME was Bittering. Harry and his wife Cora, and the swarm: Tom, David and Laura. They built a little white cottage and ate good breakfasts there, but the fear was never vanquished. It lay with Mr. Bittering and Mrs. Bittering nights, a third unbidden partner at every midnight talk, at every dawn awakening.

"I feel like a salt crystal," he often said. "In a mountain stream, being washed away. We don't belong here. We're Earth people. This is Mars. It was meant for Martians." To his wife, he pleaded, "For Heaven's sake, Cora, let's buy tickets for home!"

But she only shook her head, and said gravely, "One day the atom bomb will fix Earth. Then we'll be safe here."

"Safe and insane!"

*Tick-tock, seven o'clock* sang the voice-clock, *Time to get up*. And they did.

Something made him check everything each morning—warm hearth, potted blood-geraniums—precisely as if he expected something to be amiss. The morning paper was toast-warm from the six A.M. Earth rocket. He broke its seal and tilted it at his breakfast place. He forced himself to be convivial.

"Colonial days all over again," he declared. "Why, by gosh, in another year there'll be a million Earthmen on Mars, I bet! Big cities, everything! They said we'd fail. Said the Martians would resent our invasion. But did we find any Martians? Not a living soul! Oh, we found their empty cities, but no one in them. Right?"

A river of wind submerged the house. When the windows ceased rattling, Mr. Bittering swallowed and looked at the children.

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Little David. "Maybe there're Martians around we don't see. Sometimes nights I think I hear 'em. I hear the wind and the sand hit my window and I get scared. And I see those towns way up in the mountains where the Martians lived a long time ago. And I think I see things moving in those towns, Papa. And I think: I wonder if those Martians *mind* us coming here to live. I wonder if they won't *do* something to us for coming here."

"Nonsense!" Mr. Bittering looked out the windows. "We're clean, decent people." He looked at his children. "Dead cities all have kind of ghosts in them. Memories, I mean." He stared at the hills. "You see a staircase and you wonder what Martians looked like climbing it. You see Martian paintings and wonder what the painter was like. You make a little ghost in your mind, a memory. It's quite natural. Imagination." He stopped and gave his son a cold glance. "You haven't been prowling up in those ruins, have you?"

"No, Papa." David looked at his shoes.



"See that you stay away from them. Pass the jam."

"Just the same," said little David, "I bet something happens."

Something happened that afternoon.

Laura stumbled through the settlement, crying. She dashed blindly onto the porch.

"Mother, Father—the war, Earth!" she sobbed. "A radio flash just came. Atom bombs hit New York! All the space rockets blown up! No more rockets to Mars, ever!"

"Oh, Harry!" The mother fastened to her husband and daughter.

"Are you sure, Laura?" asked the father quietly, trembling.

Laura wept. "We're stranded on Mars, forever and ever!"

For a long time there was only the sound of the wind in the late afternoon.

"Alone," thought Bittering. "Only a thousand of us here. No way back. No way. No way." Fear-sweat poured from his face and his hands and his body, he was drenched in the hotness of the fear. He wanted to strike Laura, cry. "No, you lie! There *is* a way back! The rocket's will return!" Instead, he stroked Laura's blonde head under him and said. "Rockets will get through, some day. They *must*!"

"Five years maybe," sobbed Laura. "It takes that long to build one. Father, Father, what will we do!"

"Go about our business, of course. Raise crops and children. Wait. Keep things going until the war ends and the rockets come again."

The two boys stepped out on the porch.

"Children," he said, sitting there, his eyes holding a wild look, "I've something to tell you."

"We know," they said.

**B**ITTERING wandered numbly into the garden to stand alone in his fear. As long as the rockets had spun a red web across space, he had been able to accept Mars. For he always told himself,

"Tomorrow, if I want, I can buy a ticket, go back to Earth." That had given him the security necessary to put up with Mars.

But now! The web gone, the rockets lying in jigsaw heaps of molten girder and unsnaked wire. Earth people left to the strange mercies of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs, to be baked like gingerbread shapes in Martian summers, put into harvested storage by Martian winters. What would happen to him, the others? This was the moment Mars had waited for. Now it would eat them!

He bent into the soil to try to forget, a spade in his nervous hands. Work, work and forget, he thought dully.

He glanced up from his task to the Martian mountains. He thought of the proud old Martian names that had once been on those peaks. Earthmen, dropping from the sky, had gazed on hills, rivers, Martian seas left nameless in spite of names. Once Martians had built cities, named cities; climbed mountains, named mountains; sailed seas, named seas.

Mountains melted, seas drained, cities tumbled. In spite of this, Earthmen had felt a guilt at applying new names to these ancient hills and valleys. Nevertheless, man lives by symbol and label. The names were given.

Mr. Bittering felt very alone in his garden under the Martian sun, an anachronism bent here, planting Earth flowers in a wild soil.

Think. Theorize. Keep thinking. Different things. Take your mind off of Earth, the atom war, the lost rockets.

He sweated. He glanced about. No one watching. He removed his tie. Pretty bold, he thought. First your coat off, now your tie. He hung it neatly on a peach tree he had imported as a sapling from Massachusetts.

He returned to his philosophy of names and mountains. The Earthmen had changed names. Now there were Hormel Valleys, Roosevelt Seas, Ford

Hills, Vanderbilt Plateaus, Rockefeller Rivers on Mars. It wasn't right. The American settlers had shown wisdom, using old Indian prairie names: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Idaho, Ohio, Utah, Milwaukee, Waukegan, Osseo. The old names the old meanings.

Staring at the mountains wildly he thought, "Are you up there? All the dead ones, you Martians? Well, here we are, alone, cut off! Come down, wipe us out! We're helpless!"

The wind blew down a shower of open peach blossoms.

He put out his sun-browned hand, gave a small cry. He touched the blossoms, picked them up. He turned them over. He touched them again and again. Then, turning, he shouted for his wife.

"Cora, Cora, come here!"

She appeared at a window. He ran to her.

"Look, Cora, at these blossoms! Do you see?"

She handled them.

"Do you see?" he cried. "They're different, they've changed! They're not peach blossoms any more!"

"Look all right to me," she said.

"They're not. They're *wrong*! I can't tell how. An extra petal, a leaf, something, the color, the smell!"

The children ran out in time to see their father staggering about the garden, pulling up radishes, onions, carrots from their beds.

"Cora, come look!"

They handled the onions, the radishes, the carrots between them.

"Do these look like carrots?" he challenged.

"Yes... No." she hesitated. "I don't know."

"They're changed."

"Yes. Perhaps."

"You *know* they have! Onions but not onions, carrots but not carrots. Taste—the same but different. Smell—not like it used to be." He felt his heart beating frantically and he was afraid. He plunged his fingers into

the earth. "Cora, what's happening? We've got to get away!" He began to run across the garden. Each tree felt his touch. "The roses! They're turning green! Green roses!"

"Come see the cow, come see the cow!" chanted small Tom. "I been milking her every day this week, and just yesterday I noticed. Come on!"

They stood in the shed and looked at their cow.

It was growing a third horn.

And the lawn in front of their house— It was turning purple. Seed from Earth, but growing purple.

"We've got to get away," said Bittering, beginning to sob. "We'll eat this stuff, and we'll change. God knows to what. I won't do it! I'll kill myself first! There's only one thing to do: burn this food."

"It's not poisoned," reasoned his wife.

"It is—oh so subtly, yes, subtly. I won't eat it!"

He stared at his house. "Even the house, look at it. The wind's done something to it. The air's burned it. The night mists have warped it. It's not an Earthman's house any more."

"Oh, your imagination!"

He put on his coat and tie. "I'm going into town. We've got to do something now, act now. I'll be back."

"Wait, Harry!" the wife cried.

But he was gone.

**I**N TOWN, on the shadowy steps of the grocery store, the men sat with their hands on their knees, conversing in an easy leisure.

Mr. Bittering wanted to fire a pistol in the air.

"What are you doing, you fools!" he thought. "Sitting there! You've heard the news, we're stranded on this planet. Well, move! Aren't you frightened, excited? Aren't you afraid? what are you going to do?"

"Hello, Harry," said everyone.

"Look," he said to them. "You *have* heard the news, haven't you?"



They nodded and laughed. "Sure, sure, Harry."

"What are you going to do about it?" he almost screamed.

"Do, Harry, do? What *can* we do?"

"Build a rocket! Build a rocket, that's what!"

"A rocket, Harry? To go back to all that trouble? Oh, Harry!"

"But you *must* want to go back. Have you noticed the peach blossoms, the onions, grass?"

"Why, yes, Harry, seems we did," said one of the men.

"Didn't it scare you?"

"Can't recall that it did, much, Harry."

"Idiots!"

"Now, Harry."

Bittering wanted to cry. "You've got to work with me. If we stay here, we'll all be—changed! It's like—like—"

"Osmosis, Harry?"

"Yes! That's the word. The air. Don't you smell it. Something in the air. A Martian virus, perhaps. Some seed. Pollen. Oh, please listen to me! Don't turn away."

They stared at him.

"Sam," he said to one of them.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Will you help me build a rocket, Sam?"

"Harry, I got a whole load of metal and some old blueprints. You want to work in my metal shop, on a rocket, you're welcome. I'll sell you that metal for five hundred dollars. You should be able to construct a right pretty rocket, if you work alone, in about thirty years.

Everyone laughed.

"Don't laugh!" Harry cried.

Sam looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Sam," Bittering said. "Sam, your eyes—"

"What about them, Harry?"

"Didn't—didn't they use to be gray?"

"Well now, I don't remember."

"They were, weren't they?"

"Why you ask, Harry?"

"Because, because now they're yellow!"

"Is that so, Harry?" Sam said, casually.

"And you, you're taller and thinner—"

"You might just be right, Harry."

"Sam, you shouldn't have yellow eyes."

"Harry, what color eyes have you got?" Sam said.

"My eyes? Why they're blue of course."

"Here you are, Harry," Sam handed him a pocket mirror. "Take a look at yourself."

Mr. Bittering hesitated, and then raised the mirror to his face.

There were little faint flecks of new gold captured in the blue of his eyes.

"Now look what you've done," said Sam. "You broke my mirror."

**H**ARRY BITTERING moved into the metal shop and began to build the rocket. Men stood in the open door and talked and laughed. Once in awhile they gave him a hand on lifting something. But mostly they just idled and watched him with their yellowing eyes.

"It's supper time, Harry," they said.

His wife appeared with his supper in a wicker basket.

"I won't touch it," he said. "I'll eat only food from our deep-freeze. Food that came from Earth. Nothing from our garden."

"This is insane," said his wife. "You can't build a rocket."

"I worked in a shop once, when I was twenty. I know metal. Once I get it started, the others will help," he said, not looking at her, laying out the blueprints.

"Harry, Harry," she said, helplessly.

"We've got to escape, Cora. We've got to!"

The nights were full of wind that blew down the empty moonlit sea meadows past the little white chess cities lying for their twelve-thousandth

year in the shallows. In the Earthman's settlement, the Bittering house shook with a feeling of change.

Lying abed, Mr. Bittering felt his bones shifted, shaped, melted like gold. His wife, lying beside him, was dark from many sunny afternoons. Dark she was, and golden, burnt almost black by the sun, sleeping, and the children metallic in their beds, and the wind roaring forlorn and changing through the odd peach trees, the purple grass, shaking out green rose petals.

The fear would not be stopped. It had his throat and heart. It dripped in a wetness of the arm and the temple and the trembling palm.

A green star rose in the East.

A strange word breathed from Mr. Bittering's mouth.

"*Iorrt. Iorrt.*" He repeated it.

It was a Martian word. He knew no Martian.

In the middle of the night he arose and dialed a phone call through to Simpson, the archaeologist.

"Simpson, what does the Martian word, '*Iorrt*' mean?"

"Why, that's their old word for our planet Earth. Why?"

"No special reason."

The telephone slipped from his hand.

"Hello, hello, hello, hello," it kept saying while he sat gazing out at the green star. "Bittering? Harry are you there?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The days were full of metal sound. He laid the frame of the rocket with the idle help of three indifferent men. He grew sick, he grew tired in an hour or less, and had to sit down.

"The altitude," laughed a man.

"Are you eating, Harry?" asked another.

"I'm eating," he snapped.

"From your deep-freeze?"

"Yes!"

"You're getting thin, too, Harry."

"I'm not!"

"And taller."

"Liar!"

HIS wife entered with bad news. "Harry, I've used up all the food in the deep-freeze. There's nothing left. I had to make sandwiches using Mars-grown food."

A look of defeat shown in his eyes.

"You must eat," she said. "You're weak."

"Yes," he said.

He took a sandwich, opened it, looked at it and began to chew upon it.

"And take the rest of the day off," she said. "It's hot. The children want to swim in the canals and hike. We want you along."

"I can't take an hour off. This is a crisis!"

"Just for an hour," she urged. "A swim'll do you good."

He rose, sweating. "All right, all right, leave me alone. I'll come."

"Good for you, Harry. Come on now. Put down that hammer."

The sun was hot, the day quiet. There was only an immense staring burn upon the land. They walked along the canal, the father, the mother the racing children, in swim suits. They stopped and ate meat sandwiches. He saw their flesh baking brown. And he saw the yellow eyes of his wife and his children, that were never yellow before. A few surges of horror arose in him, but were singed away by the flurried heat waves. He was too tired to hate.

"How long have your eyes been yellow, Cora?" he asked.

"Why?" She was bewildered. "Always, I guess."

"They didn't change from brown in the last three months?"

"Why—" She bit her lips. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind."

They sat there.

"The children's eyes," he said. "They're yellow, too."



"Growing children's eyes change color."

"Maybe we're children, too. At least to Mars. That's a thought." He laughed. "Think I'll swim."

**T**HEY all leaped into the canal water.

He sank to the bottom like a golden statue and lay there in green silence. All was water quiet and deep, all was peace. He felt the steady, slow current shift him along.

"If I lay here long enough," he thought, "the water would rub and eat away my flesh until the bones showed like white coral. Just my skeleton left. And then the water would build on that skeleton—green things, marine things, red things, yellow things. Change. Change. Slow, deep, silent change. And isn't that what it is up there?"

He saw the sky submerged above him, the sun made Martian by atmosphere and time and space.

"Up there, a big river," he thought, "a Martian river, all of us lying deep in it, in our pebble houses, in our submerged boulder houses, like crayfish hidden, and the water washing away our old bodies and lengthening the bones and—"

He let himself drift up into the light.

Tom was sitting on the edge of the canal, regarding his father seriously.

"*Utha*," he said.

"What?" asked father.

The boy was irritated. "You know. *Utha's* the Martian word for 'father'."

"Where did you learn it?"

"Dunno. Around. *Utha*?"

"What do you want?"

"*Utha*." The boy looked steadily at him. "I—I want to change my name."

"Change it?"

"Yes."

His mother swam over, said, "What's wrong with Tom for a name?"

Tom fidgeted. "The other day you called Tom, Tom, Tom. I didn't even hear. Part of me said 'No, that's not

your name.' I got a swell new name I want to use."

Mr. Bittering held to the side of the canal, his face cold and his heart pounding slowly. "What is this new name, Tom?"

"*Linnl*. Isn't that a keen name, Dad—or *Utha*, I mean. Can I use it, please, please, can I, can I, please?"

Mr. Bittering put his hand to his head. He thought of the rocket, himself working alone, himself alone even among his family, so alone.

He heard his wife say: "Why not?"

He heard himself say, "Yes, you can use it."

"Yaaaa!" screamed the boy. "I'm Linnl, Linnl!"

Racing down the meadowlands, he danced and shouted.

Mr. Bittering looked at his wife, "Why did we do that?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "It just seemed like a fair idea."

They walked into the hills. They walked on old mosaic paths, beside still-pumping fountains. The paths were covered with a thin film of cool water all summer long. You kept your bare feet cool all the day, splashing as in a creek, wading.

They reached a small deserted Martian villa with a good view of the valley. It was on top of a hill. Cool marble halls, big murals, a swimming pool. It was cool in this hot summertime. The Martians hadn't believed in large cities.

"How nice it would be," said Mrs. Bittering, "if we could move up here to this villa for the summer."

"Come on," he said, angrily. "We're going back down to town. Work on the rocket!"

But as he worked that night, the thought of the cool villa entered his mind. As the hours passed, the rocket seemed less important. In fact, in the passing days and weeks, the rocket had receded in importance. The old fever was gone. It frightened him to think that he had let it slip this

way. But somehow, the heat, the air, the working conditions—

He heard the men talking out on the porch of the metal shop.

"Everyone's going. You heard?"

"All going. That's right."

Bittering came out. "Going where?"

He saw a couple of trucks, loaded with children and adults and bits of furniture, drive down the dusty street.

"Up to the villas," said the men.

"Yeah, Harry, I'm going. So is Sam, aren't you, Sam?"

"That's right, Harry. What about you?"

"I've got work to do."

"Work! You can finish that rocket in the autumn, when it's cooler."

He took a breath. "I got the frame all set up."

"In the autumn is better." Their voices were lazy in the heat.

"Got to work," he said.

"Autumn," they reasoned. And they sounded so sensible, so right.

"Autumn would be best," he reasoned. "Plenty of time, then."

"No!" shrieked part of his conscience, deep down inside, put away, locked tight, suffocating. "No! Escape!"

"Yes, in the autumn," he mused.

"Come on, Harry," they all said, under water.

"Yes," he said, feeling his flesh melt away in the hot liquid air. "Yes, in the autumn. I'll begin work again then."

"I got a villa near the Tirrahna Canal," said Sam.

"You mean the Roosevelt Canal."

"Tirrahna. The old Martian name."

"But on the map—" began Bittering.

"Forget the map. It's Tirrahna now. My villa near the Pillano Mountains—"

You mean the Rockefeller Mountains," said Bittering.

"I meant the Pillano Mountains," said Sam.

"Yes," said Bittering, sinking under the hot liquid air. "The Pillano Mountains."

ALL WORKED at loading the truck in the hot still afternoon of the next day.

Laura, Tom and David carried packages. Or, more accurately, Uttil, Linnl and Werre carried packages. All three had changed their names.

The furniture was abandoned in the little white cottage.

"It looked just fine on Beacon Street in Boston," said the mother. "And here in the cottage. But up at the villa? No. We'll get it when we come back here in the autumn."

Bittering himself was quiet.

"I've some ideas for furniture up at the villa," he said, after a time. "Big and lazy furniture."

"What about your Encyclopaedia Britannica?" asked the mother. "You're taking them along, surely?"

Mr. Bittering glanced away. "I'll come get them next week."

"Laura!" called mother. "What about your New York dresses?"

The bewildered girl stared. "Why, I just don't want them any more."

They turned off the gas, the water, they locked the doors and walked away. Father peered into the truck.

"Gosh, we're not taking much," he said. "Considering all we brought to Mars, this is only a handful!"

He started the truck.

Looking at the small white cottage for a long moment, he was filled with a desire to rush to it, touch it, say good-by to it, for he felt as if he were going away on a long journey to somewhere and leaving something to which he could never quite return or understand again.

Just then, Sam and his family drove by in another truck.

"Hi, Bittering! Here we go, up to the villas!"

The trucks swung down the ancient highway out of town. There were sixty others traveling the same direction. The town filled with a silent, heavy dust from their passage. The canal waters lay blue in the sun, and a quiet wind blew over Mars.



"Good-by, town!" said Mr. Bittering.

"Good-by, good-by!" sang the family, waving to it.

They did not look back again.

Summer burned the canals dry. Summer moved like flame upon the meadows. In the empty Earth settlement, the painted houses flaked and peeled. Rubber tires upon which children had swung in back yards hung suspended like stopped clock pendulums, burning on the air.

In the metal shop, the rocket frame began to rust.

In the quiet autumn, when it came time to move back down to town, Mr. Bittering stood, very dark now, very golden-eyed, upon the hill near his villa, looking at the valley.

"It's time to go back," said Cora.

"Yes, but we're not going," he said quietly. "There's nothing there any more."

"Your books," she said. "Your fine clothes."

"Your *blles* and your fine *Iorm puele rre*," she said.

"The town's empty. No one's going back," was his answer. "There's no reason to, none at all."

The daughter wove tapestries and the sons played songs on ancient flutes and pipes, their laughter echoing in the marble villa.

Mr. Bittering gazed at the Earth settlement far away in the low valley. "Such odd, such ridiculous houses those Earth people built," he commented.

"They didn't know any better," his wife mused. "Such ugly people. I'm glad they're gone."

They both looked at each other, startled that they had used the third person, plural, past tense. They laughed.

"Where did they go?" he wondered. He looked at his wife. She was golden and slender as his daughter. She looked at him. And he seemed almost as young as their eldest son.

"I don't know," she said.

"We'll go back to town maybe next year, or the year after, or the year after that," he said calmly. "Now—I'm warm. Let's swim."

They turned their backs to the valley. Arm in arm, they walked silently into their villa.

**F**IVE years later, the rocket fell out of the sky. It lay steaming in the valley. Men Americans, leaped out crying:

"We won the war on Earth! Here we are to rescue you! Hey!"

But the American-built town of cottages, peach trees and theaters was silent. They found a half-done rocket frame, rusting.

The rocket men searched the hills. The rocket captain established headquarters in an abandoned saloon. He was drinking whisky when his lieutenant returned to report:

"The town's empty, but we found native life in the hills, sir. Dark, yellow-eyed people. Martians. Very friendly. We talked a little, not much. They learn English fast. I'm sure our relations will be most friendly with them, sir."

"Dark people, eh?" mused the captain. "How many?"

"Six, eight hundred, I'd say, living in those marble villas in the hills, sir. Tall, healthy as can be. Beautiful women."

"Did they tell you what happened to the original inhabitants of this Earth settlement, lieutenant?"

"They hadn't the foggiest notion of what happened to this town or the people from it."

"Strange." The captain swallowed his drink meditatively. "You think those Martians killed them?"

"They look remarkably peaceful, sir. Probably a plague did this town in."

"Perhaps." The captain poured another drink. "Drink up, Lieutenant. I suppose this is a mystery we'll never solve. One of those mysteries you hear about."

(Continued on page 62)



## A WALK IN THE DARK

BY ARTHUR C. CLARKE

*He had laughed at the tale of monsters, but now in the night fear crept in*

**R**OBERT ARMSTRONG had walked just over two miles, as far as he could judge, when his torch failed. He stood still for a moment, unable to believe that such a misfortune could really have befallen him. Then, half maddened with rage, he hurled the useless instrument away. It landed somewhere in the darkness, disturbing the silence of this little world. A metallic echo came ringing

back from the low hills. Then all was quiet again.

This, thought Armstrong, was the ultimate misfortune. Nothing more could happen to him now. He was even able to laugh bitterly at his luck, and resolved never again to imagine that the fickle goddess had ever favoured him. Who would have believed that the only tractor at Camp IV would have broken down when he was just

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setting off for Port Sanderson? He recalled the frenzied repair work, the relief when the second start had been made—and the final debacle when the caterpillar track had jammed hopelessly.

It was no use then regretting the lateness of his departure: he could not have foreseen these accidents and it was still a good four hours before the *Canopus* took off. He *had* to catch her, whatever happened: no other ship would be touching at this world for another month. Apart from the urgency of his business, four more weeks on this out-of-the-way planet were unthinkable.

There had been only one thing to do. It was lucky that Port Sanderson was little more than six miles from the camp—not a great distance, even on foot. He had been forced to leave all his equipment behind, but it could follow on the next ship and he could manage without it. The road was poor, merely stamped out of the rock by one of the Board's hundred-ton crushers, but there was no fear of going astray.

Even now, he was in no real danger, though he might well be too late to catch the ship. Progress would be slow for he dare not risk losing the road in this region of canyons and enigmatic tunnels that had never been explored. It was, of course, pitch dark. Here at the edge of the Galaxy the stars were so few and scattered that their light was negligible. The strange crimson sun of this lonely world would not rise for many hours, and although five of the little moons were in the sky they could barely be seen by the unaided eye. Not one of them could even cast a shadow.

Armstrong was not the man to bewail his luck for long. He began to walk slowly along the road, feeling its texture with his feet. It was, he knew, fairly straight except where it wound through Carver's Pass. He wished he had a stick or something to probe the way before him, but he would have to

rely for guidance on the feel of the ground.

**I**T was terribly slow at first, until he gained confidence. He had never known how difficult it was to walk in a straight line. Although the feeble stars gave him his bearings, again and again he found himself stumbling among the virgin rocks at the edge of the crude roadway. He was traveling in long zig-zags that took him to alternate sides of the road. Then he would stub his toes against the bare rock and grope his way back on to the hard-packed surface once again.

Presently it settled down to a routine. It was impossible to estimate his speed: he could only struggle along and hope for the best. There were four miles to go—four miles and as many hours. It should be easy enough, unless he lost his way. But he dared not think of that.

Once he had mastered the technique he could afford the luxury of thought. He could not pretend that he was enjoying the experience, but he had been in much worse positions before. As long as he remained on the road, he was perfectly safe. He had been hoping that as his eyes became adapted to the starlight he would be able to see the way, but he now knew that the whole journey would be blind. The discovery gave him a vivid sense of his remoteness from the heart of the Galaxy. On a night as clear as this, the skies of almost any other planet would have been blazing with stars. Here at this outpost of the Universe the sky held perhaps a hundred faintly gleaming points of lights, as useless as the five ridiculous moons on which no one had ever bothered to land.

A slight change in the road interrupted his thoughts. Was there a curve here, or had he veered off to the right again? He moved very slowly along the invisible and ill-defined border. Yes, there was no mistake: the road was bending to the left. He tried to re-

member its appearance in the day time, but he had only seen it once before. Did this mean that he was nearing the Pass? He hoped so, for the journey, would then be half completed.

He peered ahead into the blackness but the ragged line of the horizon told him nothing. Presently he found that the road had straightened itself again and his spirits sank. The entrance to the Pass must still be some way ahead: there were at least four more miles to go.

Four miles! How ridiculous the distance seemed! How long would it take the *Canopus* to travel four miles? He doubted if man could measure so short an interval of time. And how many trillions of miles had he, Robert Armstrong, traveled in his life? It must have reached a staggering total by now, for in the last twenty years he had scarcely stayed more than a month at a time on any single world. This very year, he had twice made the crossing of the Galaxy, and that was a notable journey even in these days of the phantom drive.

He tripped over a loose stone, and the jolt brought him back to reality. It was no use, here, thinking of ships that could eat up the light-years. He was facing nature, with no weapons but his own strength and skill.

It was strange that it took him so long to identify the real cause of his uneasiness. The last four weeks had been very full, and the rush of his departure, coupled with the annoyance and anxiety caused by the tractor's breakdowns, had driven everything else from his mind. Moreover, he had always prided himself on his hard-headedness and lack of imagination. Until now, he had forgotten all about that first evening at the base, when the crews had regaled him with the usual tall yarns concocted for the benefit of newcomers.

It was then that the old base clerk had told the story of his walk by night from Port Sanderson to the camp, and of what had trailed him through Car-

ver's Pass, keeping always beyond the limit of his torchlight.

ARMSTRONG, who had heard such tales on a score of worlds, had paid it little attention at the time. This planet, after all, was known to be uninhabited. But logic could not dispose of the matter as easily as that. Suppose, after all, there was some truth in the old man's fantastic tale?

It was not a pleasant thought, and Armstrong did not intend to brood upon it. But he knew that if he dismissed it out of hand, it would continue to prey on his mind. The only way to conquer imaginary fears was to face them boldly: he would have to do that now.

His strongest argument was the complete barrenness of this world and its utter desolation, though against that one could set many counter-arguments, as indeed the old clerk had done. Man had only lived on this planet for twenty years, and much of it was still unexplored. No one could deny that the tunnels out in the waste-land were rather puzzling, but everyone believed them to be volcanic vents. Though, of course, life often crept into such places. With a shudder he remembered the giant polyps that had snared the first explorers of *Vargon III*.

It was all very inconclusive: suppose, for the sake of argument, one granted the existence of life here. What of that?

The vast majority of life forms in the Universe were completely indifferent to man. Some, of course, like the gas-beings of Alcoran or the roving wave-lattices of Shandaloon, could not even detect him but passed through or around him as if he did not exist. Others were merely inquisitive, some embarrassingly friendly. There were few indeed that would attack unless provoked.

Nevertheless, it was a grim picture that the old stores clerk had painted. Back in the warm, well-lighted smok-



ing-room, with the drinks going round, it had been easy enough to laugh at it. But here in the darkness, miles from any human settlement, it was different.

It was almost a relief when he stumbled off the road again and had to grope with his hands until he found it once more. This seemed a very rough patch, and the road was scarcely distinguishable from the rocks around. In a few minutes, however, he was safely on his way again.

It was unpleasant to see how quickly his thoughts returned to the same disquieting subject. Clearly it was worrying him more than he cared to admit.

He drew consolation from one fact: it had been quite obvious that no one at the base had believed the old fellow's story. Their questions and banter had proved that. At the time, he had laughed as loudly as any of them. After all, what *was* the evidence? A dim shape, just seen in the darkness, that might well have been an oddly formed rock. And the curious clicking noise that had so impressed the old man. Anyone could imagine such sounds at night if they were sufficiently overwrought. If it had been hostile, why hadn't the creatures come any closer?

"Because it was afraid of my light," the old chap had said.

Well, that was plausible enough: it would explain why nothing had ever been seen in the daytime. Such a creature might live underground, only emerging at night. Hang it, why was he taking the old idiot's ravings so seriously! Armstrong got control of his thoughts again. If he went on this way, he told himself angrily, he would soon be seeing and hearing a whole menagerie of monsters.

There was, of course, one factor that disposed of the ridiculous story at once. It was really very simple: he felt sorry he hadn't thought of it before. What would such a creature live on? There was not even a trace of

vegetation on the whole of the planet. He laughed to think that the boggy could be disposed of so easily—and in the same instant felt annoyed with himself for not laughing aloud. If he was so sure of his reasoning, why not whistle, or sing, or do anything to keep up his spirits? He put the question fairly to himself as a test of his manhood. Half-ashamed, he had to admit that he was still afraid—afraid because "there *might* be something in it, after all." But at least his analysis had done him some good.

**I**T would have been better if he had left it there, and remained half-convinced by his argument. But a part of his mind was still busily trying to break down his careful reasoning. It succeeded only too well, and when he remembered the plant-beings of Xantil Major the shock was so unpleasant that he stopped dead in his tracks.

Now the plant-beings of Xantil were not in any way horrible: they were in fact extremely beautiful creatures. But what made them appear so distressing now was the knowledge that they could live for indefinite periods with no food whatsoever. All the energy they needed for their strange lives they extracted from cosmic radiation—and that was almost as intense here as anywhere else in the universe.

He had scarcely thought of one example before others crowded into his mind and he remembered the life form on Trantor Beta, which was the only one known capable of directly utilizing atomic energy. That too had lived on an utterly barren world, very much like this. . . .

Armstrong's mind was rapidly splitting into two distinct portions, one half trying to convince the other and neither wholly succeeding. He did not realize how far his morale had gone until he found himself holding his breath lest it conceal any sound from the darkness about him. Angrily, he cleared his mind of the rubbish that

had been gathering there and turned once more to the immediate problem.

There was no doubt that the road was slowly rising, and silhouette of the horizon seemed much higher in the sky. The road began to twist, and suddenly he was aware of great rocks on either side of him. Soon only a narrow ribbon of sky was still visible, and the darkness became, if possible, even more intense.

Somehow, he felt safer with the rock walls surrounding him. It meant that he was protected except in two directions. Also, the road had been leveled more carefully and it was easy to keep to it. Best of all, he knew now that the journey was more than half completed.

For a moment his spirits began to rise. Then, with maddening perversity, his mind went back into the old grooves again. He remembered that it was on the far side of Carver's Pass that the old clerk's adventure had taken place, if it had ever happened at all.

In half a mile, he would be out in the open again, out of the protection of these sheltering rocks. The thought seemed doubly horrible now and he felt already a sense of nakedness. He could be attacked from any direction, and he would be utterly helpless.

Until now, he had still retained some self-control. Very resolutely he had kept his mind away from the one fact that gave some colour to the old man's tale—the single piece of evidence that had stopped the banter in the crowded room back at the camp and brought a sudden hush upon the company. Now, as Armstrong's will weakened, he recalled again the words that had struck a momentary chill even in the warm comfort of the base building.

The little clerk had been very insistent on one point. He had never heard any sound of pursuit from the dim shape sensed rather than seen at the limit of his light. There was no scuffling of claws or hooves on rock, nor ever the clatter of displaced stones. It

was as if, so the old man had declared in that solemn manner of his, "as if the thing that was following could see perfectly in the darkness, and had many small legs or pads so that it could move swiftly and easily over the rock, like a giant caterpillar or one of the carpet-things of *Kralkor II*."

Yet, although there had been no noise of pursuit, there had been one sound that the old man had caught several times. It was so unusual that its very strangeness made it doubly ominous. It was a faint but horribly persistent *clicking*.

The old fellow had been able to describe it very vividly—much too vividly for Armstrong's liking now.

"Have you ever listened to a large insect crunching its prey?" he said. "Well, it was just like that. I imagine that a crab makes exactly the same noise with its claws when it clashes them together. It was a—what's the word? A *chitinous* sound."

At this point, Armstrong remembered laughing loudly. (Strange, how it was all coming back to him now.) But no-one else had laughed, though they had been quick to do so earlier. Sensing the change of tone, he had sobered at once and asked the old man to continue his story.

It had been quickly told. The next day, a party of sceptical technicians had gone into the no-man's-land beyond Carver's Pass. They were not sceptical enough to leave their guns behind, but they had no cause to use them for they found no trace of any living thing. There were the inevitable pits and tunnels, glistening holes down which the light of the torches rebounded endlessly until it was lost in the distance, but the planet was riddled with them.

Though the party found no sign of life, it discovered one thing it did not like at all. Out in the barren and unexplored land beyond the Pass they had come upon an even larger tunnel



than the rest. Near the mouth of that tunnel was a massive rock, half embedded in the ground. And the sides of that rock had been worn away, as if it had been used as an enormous whetstone!

No less than five of those present had seen this disturbing rock. None of them could explain it satisfactorily as a natural formation, but they still refused to accept the old man's story. Armstrong had asked them if they had ever put it to the test. There had been an uncomfortable silence. Then big Andrew Hargraves had said: "Hell, who'd walk out to the Pass at night just for fun!" and had left it at that.

Indeed, there was no other record of anyone walking from Port Sanderson to the camp by night, or for that matter by day. During the hours of light, no unprotected human being could live in the open beneath the rays of the enormous, lurid sun that seemed to fill half the sky. And no one would walk six miles, wearing radiation armour, if the tractor was available.

Armstrong felt that he was leaving the Pass. The rocks on either side were falling away, and the road was no longer as firm and well-packed as it had been. He was coming out into the open plain once more, and somewhere not far away in the darkness was the enigmatic pillar that might have been used for sharpening monstrous fangs or claws. It was not a reassuring thought.

Feeling distinctly worried now, Armstrong made a great effort to pull himself together. He would try and be rational again: he would think of business, the work he had done at the camp—anything but this infernal place. For a while, he succeeded quite well. But presently, with a maddening persistence, every train of thought came back to the same point. He could not get out of his mind the picture of that inexplicable rock and its appalling possibilities.

The ground was quite flat again, and the road drove on straight as an

arrow. There was one gleam of consolation: Port Sanderson could not be much more than two miles away. Armstrong had no idea how long he had been on the road. Unfortunately his watch was not illuminated and he could only guess at the passage of time. With any luck, the *Canopus* should not take off for another two hours at least. But he could not be sure, and now another fear began to enter his mind, the dread that he might see a vast constellation of lights rising swiftly into the sky ahead, and know that all his agony of mind had been in vain.

He was not zig-zagging so badly now, and seemed to be able to anticipate the edge of the road before stumbling off it. It was probable, he cheered himself by thinking, that he was travelling almost as fast as if he had a light. If all went well, he might be nearing Port Sanderson in thirty minutes, a ridiculously small space of time. How he would laugh at his fears when he strolled into his already reserved stateroom in the *Canopus*, and felt that peculiar quiver as the phantom drive hurled the great ship far out of this system, back to the clustered star-clouds near the center of the Galaxy, back towards Earth itself, which he had not seen for so many years.

ONE day, he told himself, he really must visit Earth again. All his life he had been making the promise, but always there had been the same answer—lack of time. Strange, wasn't it, that such a tiny planet should have played so enormous a part in the development of the Universe, should even have come to dominate worlds far wiser and more intelligent than itself!

Armstrong's thoughts were harmless again, and he felt calmer. The knowledge that he was nearing Port Sanderson was immensely reassuring, and he deliberately kept his mind on familiar, unimportant matters. Carver's Pass was already far behind and with it that thing he no longer intended to recall.

One day, if he ever returned to this world, he would visit the pass in the day time and laugh at his fears. In twenty minutes now, they would have joined the horrifying nightmares of his childhood.

It was almost a shock, though one of the most pleasant he had ever known, when he saw the lights of Port Sanderson come up over the horizon. The curvature of this little world was very deceptive: it did not seem right that a planet with a gravity almost as great as Earth's should have a horizon so close at hand. One day, someone would have to discover what lay at this world's core to give it so great a density.

Perhaps the many tunnels would help, it was an unfortunate turn of thought, but the nearness of his goal had robbed it of terror now. Indeed, the thought that he might really be in danger seemed to give his adventure a certain piquancy and heightened interest. Nothing could happen to him now, with ten minutes to go and the lights of the Port in sight.

A few minutes later, his feelings changed abruptly when he came to the sudden bend in the road. He had forgotten the chasm that caused this detour, and added half a mile to the journey. Well, what of it? An extra half-mile would make no difference now—another ten minutes, at the most.

It was very disappointing when the lights of the city vanished. Armstrong had not remembered the hill which the road was skirting: perhaps it was only a low ridge, scarcely noticeable in the daytime. But by hiding the lights of the port it had taken away his chief talisman and left him again at the mercy of his fears.

Very unreasonable, his intelligence told him, he began to think how horrible it would be if anything happened

now, so near the end of the journey. He kept the worst of his fear at bay for a while, hoping desperately that the lights of the city would soon reappear. But as the minutes dragged on, he realized that the ridge must be longer than he imagined. He tried to cheer himself by the thought that the city would be all the nearer when he saw it again, but somehow logic seemed to have failed him now. For presently he found himself doing something he had not stooped to, even out in the waste by Carver's Pass.

He stopped, turned slowly round, and with bated breath listened until his lungs were nearly bursting.

The silence was uncanny, considering how near he must be to the Port. There was certainly no sound from behind him. Of course there wouldn't be, he told himself angrily. But he was immensely relieved. The thought of that faint and insistent clicking had been haunting him for the last hour.

So friendly and familiar was the noise that did reach him at last that the anti-climax almost made him laugh aloud. Drifting through the still air from a source clearly not more than a mile away came the sound of a landing-field tractor, perhaps one of the machines loading the *Canopus* itself. In a matter of seconds, thought Armstrong, he would be around this ridge with the port only a few hundred yards ahead. The journey was nearly ended. In a few moments, this evil plain would be no more than a fading nightmare.

It seemed terribly unfair: so little time, such a small fraction of a human life, was all he needed now. But the gods have always been unfair to man, and now they were enjoying their little jest. For there could be no mistaking the rattle of monstrous claws in the darkness *ahead of him*.







# MATING TIME

BY JOSEPH SHALLIT

*There were just the two of them from Earth, but the Bugeyes hoped for more . . .*

**R**OB MALLON lay in the back of the enclosure, in the shade of the canopy, and scratched his beard. He hardly looked at the three Bugeyes who were standing outside, holding a gibbering conference. They stood close together, pressed against the bars, their green eyes swelling, their flat, high-winged noses quivering, their voices squeaking excitedly.

This had been going on for weeks now, but it didn't bother him. They had something on their minds. After a while, they would go ahead and do it. It was nothing for him to beat his brain about. At the moment, he was scratching his beard. In a little while, he'd have something to eat. Then he'd take a nap.

Abruptly the three Bugeyes left the

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cage and walked across the yard toward the long, low building. That was where, a long time ago, they had kept Rob in a cage under observation before moving him out to this nice, big, roomy pen. At the time, he'd figured they were some sort of scientists or zoo officials, something like that. He hadn't thought much about them lately, though they came around to look at him practically every day.

Hazily he watched them go inside the building. He kept scratching through his beard, trying to reach the particularly itchy spot on the right side of his jaw. He wondered vaguely if there was some sort of louse in there. Did they have lice on this gruesome planet? Or were all the inhabitants simply a kind of king-sized louse?

The thought amused him in a fuzzy sort of way. Distantly he felt his lips turn up. It was a queer feeling. How long since he'd last smiled? How many years? Some day he ought to figure it out. . . .

Something was happening at the far end of the building. It was just at the edge of his vision, the way he was lying now, and naturally he didn't move, but he could make out the fact that the wide door at the end was opening, and something was being pushed out by the Bugeyes. A cage? Yes. A cage on wheels.

Rob debated with himself a while, and finally convinced himself he ought to make the effort to turn over and have a good look.

It was another human!

A human lying there in the back of the cage, as white and naked as he was, with a long, glossy beard—

Hell, no! That wasn't a beard. It was head hair. . . . It was—it was—

A woman.

**H**E DIDN'T know how it happened, but he was on his feet now, pressed close to the bars, holding on tight—holy hell, a woman!

She had seen him. She was lying in

the shade of the opaque rear wall of the cage and it was hard to make out her face. But evidently she had seen him, because she was rolling away, turning her back to him—God, what a back!

The Bugeyes brought the cage to a spot only about six feet from Rob's enclosure, and shoved blocks under the wheels. Then they walked halfway back toward the building and stopped and stood there in a gibbering huddle.

"Hey, over there," Rob said hoarsely.

The woman's hand came around and worked on her long hair, pushing it to cover as much of her back as possible. Her hair was a silky-looking auburn. Her skin was very pale. The thought of her softness dizzied him. After looking at nothing but glossy, hard-skinned, metallic green Bugeyes. . . .

"Hey, look over here, will you?" he called out. And suddenly realized he was *talking*—talking again after all these years—talking not to himself but another human—and he could talk, too. He thought he sounded normal; the words poured out without a struggle.

"I'm Rob Mallon. I've been here for years—I don't know how long. They captured me with another guy, but he died after the first couple of months." He wanted to talk and talk. "When'd they get you? How long've you been up here? I didn't know they had anybody in that building. I knew they had some animals—horses and dogs—I didn't know they had any people. Are you the only one? Are there really any people left down there on Earth? Where did they get you? What's your name?"

The woman made no sound, no motion.

"For crying out loud," Rob said. "You going to snub me?"

The three Bugeyes were back. They came in between the cage and the enclosure, squeaking excitedly. They were lugging some sort of equipment.



"Hey, Auburn Hair, what's the matter?" Rob said. "You sick? Say something will you? I haven't heard a voice outside of my own for. . . except for this goddam mousy squeaking."

The Bugeyes were erecting a runway between the enclosure and the woman's cage. It was a tube of meshed metal. They bolted one end so that it circled his door. The other end, he saw, was being similarly fitted around the door of the woman's cage. So that. . .

Holy, hell, it was just what he'd once seen done in his home-town zoo. . .

"Hey, woman, look what they're doing!" he shouted.

Adam and Eve!

There was something boiling up in him, a wildness he hadn't suspected existed in him any more. His hands were tight around the bars. He shook them. He shook them hard. He gave a loud, vicious laugh. "Adam and Eve!" He rushed to the door and banged on it. The woman's head slowly turned. He saw dark, heavy-lidded eyes. He saw them go round in alarm. He laughed out loud again. "Adam and Eve!" he yelled. He felt dizzy—drunk—

The woman had turned all the way around. God, a knockout! White and curvesome and delicious. She was sitting up. Her eyes were darting frantically from the Bugeyes to him. The Bugeyes were unlocking his door with their long, prong-tipped poles. He leaped into the passageway. His head bumped wickedly against the top—he was knocked backwards, flat, bouncing on his back. He scrambled up again, his head ringing. Damned passageway was too low. Had to keep his head down. Had to stoop. Run, stooping. Run—

He was at her door. Pounding it, shaking it, his mouth dripping with laughter—"Adam and Eve!"

A Bugeye was working at her door with one of the prong-tipped poles.

Rob howled, "Come on, you pop-eyed jerk!"

The girl was suddenly on her feet, rushing to the door. His eyes wobbled, dazzled by the rolling revelation of her body—

Her scream almost lifted his scalp.

She hurled herself against the door, spitting, screaming, trying to claw him through the grill. The next moment she had snatched the pole from the Bugeye—swung it around—jabbed it through the grill. The prongs ripped into Rob's chest—he yelled, he staggered back, unbelieving. The woman was a maniac!

She kept spitting, screaming, lunging at him—he pulled back out of her reach, dazedly watching the blood ooze from the torn skin of his chest. The goddamn maniac. She had come within an inch of killing him.

SOMETHING poked his side—what the hell was going on? It was one of the Bugeyes. He was jabbing Rob back toward his pen, squeaking hysterically. The other two Bugeyes joined him, pushing their skinny fringed hands through the wire mesh. Rob kicked at them. "I'm going," he snarled.

He went back to the canopy and flopped down. His chest was throbbing. He pressed his hands against the oozing skin. He felt very tired. How had it happened—how the hell had he let himself get so excited? At this late date. He must have been out of his mind. He should have known no good would come out of getting hysterical and jumping around.

He rolled his back to the cage. He didn't want to see that woman again. He hoped the Bugeyes would move her back to the building, fast. The bugs had probably been scared out of their wits. Here they'd thought they were going to have a nice, efficient mating, and instead, the female had turned out to be a maniac and darn near killed the male.

The three Bugeyes went away, past

the enclosure. They were still gibbering at each other, but in a dull, mournful way. Rob was busy now watching his chest. Watching the slow, fascinating oozing of the blood.

"I'm sorry I had to do it."

The woman! The goddamn maniac was talking!

"I hope I didn't hurt you too badly," she said. Then, after a pause, "Of course, you deserved it. Your behavior was unspeakable."

He lay there puzzling. After a while, he rolled over and looked at her. She was lying facing him. Her legs were drawn up to her belly, and her long hair was strategically arranged along her front.

"Are you still bleeding?" she said. She sounded worried.

"You—you aren't crazy!" Rob growled.

"Are your hands clean?" she said. "If you're not bleeding hard, you'd be better off not touching your chest."

"You aren't crazy at all," he complained.

"I'm sorry—it was the only thing I could do. Those creatures were... trying to make an animal out of me. And you—" her voice suddenly flared up—"you were doing your best to cooperate!"

"Only trying to be friendly," Rob muttered.

"Yes—friendly!"

"Okay, what do you expect? A man's been alone for years, and the most beautiful woman he's ever seen—"

"Please—spare the compliments." She looked away angrily. "I'm sure a contemptible thing like you would act precisely the same with any woman—with one of these creatures..."

"You're crazy," he said—but he defended himself a little uncomfortably. He *had* cast an appraising eye a couple of times at some of the female Bugeyes, several that hadn't seemed quite as green and metallic looking as the rest. But that had been a good while ago, before he had decided that

nothing, *nothing*, was worth making any effort for. As long as they fed him regularly, and kept the pool full enough for him to dunk himself. . . .

"So don't try to justify yourself," she said, "because—"

"Ah," shut up. I'm here bleeding to death, and you give me a hard time."

"Oh, dear," she said, anxious again. "I *wish* I had some bandages. Are you really bleeding hard? There's a pressure point—"

"Forget it—it's stopping. . . . What're you, a nurse or something?"

"No, but I worked in a hospital. Electroencephalography."

"What the hell's that?"

"Brain waves."

"Uh huh. When'd the Bugeyes get you?"

"The who?"

"These lice—these Bugeyes."

"Oh, you mean the Grorks."

"That's what *you* call them?"

"That's what they call themselves. Why on earth do you say Bugeyes?"

"Because that's what they are—hey! You mean to say you understand their language?"

"Some of it—certainly."

"How the hell do you do that?"

"I *listen* to them. Don't you?"

**R**OB glowered at her. The girl was getting on his nerves. The goddamn brain wave. The eager beaver. *I listen to them. Don't you?* For God's sake. . . .

He looked down at his chest. The oozing seemed to have stopped. He felt a little sorry. It had been something interesting to watch. Something he could watch lying on his back. . . .

"They captured me about nine months ago," she said, her voice lower, duller. "We were living in a cave in Vermont. Near Rutland. There were five of us. We ran out of water one night, and I went down to the stream to get some, and a Grork patrol ship spotted me in the dark, and they came down and got me. Then they traced



my steps back to the cave and..." She stopped, her eyes big and haunted.

"What's left down there?" he growled. "Anything?"

"A few people—we had short-wave communication for a while with some groups hiding in caves in the Rockies. There were at least a dozen groups we knew about. But then we found out the Gorks were flying in on our signals, and we had to stop."

"I'm surprised you held out this long. I thought everything was wiped out when they got me. They took me on a quick ride across the continent and over most of Europe and Asia. I didn't see a thing standing, or moving."

"How long ago did they get you?" she said.

He shrugged. "Years and years ago."

"You mean the first attack?"

"I guess so. I didn't know there was more than one."

"If you were captured in the first attack, it was just a little over two years ago."

What? Couldn't be. It was years and years. How would she know? How could she keep track of time any better than he could on this goddamn planet that didn't have any seasons?

"Where were you when they caught you?" the girl said.

"In a plane. American Airlines."

"How did it happen?"

"How the hell should I know? That goddamn disintegrator they have. The Bugeye ship came along parallel to ours about a mile off, and the next thing, there wasn't any plane around me—nothing—just me and the co-pilot and a few small pieces of passengers drifting through the air. Why the two of us weren't disintegrated, too, I've never figured out. Maybe something about the cockpit shielded us. Or maybe they can adjust that gun so they don't get everybody. I think they wanted some captives. The way they zoomed over and scooped us up..."

The girl was looking at him with

sudden animation. "You mean you were *piloting* that plane?"

"Sure."

"My goodness—you're a pilot!"

"Well, gee whiz—you sure are quick today."

"But—but if you're a pilot, why haven't you gotten one of their ships and escaped?"

His mouth wrinkled. He wanted to make some nasty, needling crack, but he couldn't think of anything offhand. He rolled over on his back again. Escape! What a laugh.

"Listen to me!" She sounded closer. She had evidently come over to the bars of her cage, but he couldn't be bothered to look. "We can get away from here," she said urgently.

WHAT? he grumbled. "What do you want?" The skin under his beard was itching again. It seemed to him that since this woman came on the scene, he was beginning to itch worse than ever.

"Listen. When they brought you up here, you saw how they operated the ship, didn't you?"

"That was years ago."

"But haven't they taken you on exhibition tours around this planet, the way they've done me?"

"Uh huh."

"Then you must have had a chance to see how the controls work."

"I guess so," he said reluctantly.

"For heaven's sake, sit up and listen—and stop your scratching!"

"Shut up and leave me alone, will you?" The damned harpy. He was beginning to itch *all over*.

"Rob—is that what you said your name is—Rob? Tell me something. Do you know where we are? Do you know where this place is?"

"Somewhere in the Milky Way," he grumbled. "What's the difference?"

"Do you know where our sun is from here?"

He grunted.

"You mean you *know*?"

"You can see the goddamn thing when the sky gets dark."

"Wonderful!" she cried.

"What's so wonderful?" he inquired sourly.

"All we have to do is get on a ship and aim our course at the sun till we see Earth—"

"What for—do you mind telling me? Assuming we could get through these doors, and assuming we could steal a ship, what are we supposed to go to all the trouble for?"

"But—but—" she choked—"to escape—get back home—"

"What home? What home're you talking about? The whole goddamn place is flattened out."

"But there are still some people there—our people!" she cried. "We belong with them. You don't want to spend the rest of your life here!"

"Why not?"

"In a cage?"

"This isn't a cage, sister. They started me in a cage, just like yours, but then they promoted me to this big enclosure—with my own swimming pool, even." He stretched his arms languorously. "Listen, sister, for the first time in my life I don't have a worry. Not a one. I get plenty to eat—go to sleep whenever I feel like it—no clock to punch, no schedules to meet, no bills to pay, no nothing. I tell you, I'm really living—really relaxed—first time in my life. And you want me to get messed up with that rat race again?"

"Rat race?" she exclaimed. "Is that what you call being a human being? A rat race?"

"Can you think of any better—"

He shut himself off. He'd been talking too loud and too long—worn himself out. Stupid jerk, getting himself worked up over nothing.

He swiveled around on his right side, giving her his back again. He was way overdue on his nap. He should have been asleep an hour ago.

"All right," the girl said slowly. "I see how it is. You've run out on being a human being. You've abdicated."

He grunted. He hoped, now she'd got that off her chest, that she'd be quiet.

"And don't you care if you never see the lovely Earth again?" she said.

"Dammit! You going to give me hearts and flowers?"

"But you must have had somebody down there you cared for—relatives, friends—somebody you felt a responsibility toward."

**L**ISTEN, sister. Two aunts I was supporting, ever since I can remember—a house I was paying off on, ever since I can remember—a car I was three payments behind on—Responsibility? Nothing but. Now, *whoosh!* It's all canceled out. First time in my life I've got no responsibilities. What do you want me to do—hunt up new ones?"

"But the people still there— isn't it your duty to go back and help them organize—free themselves from the Gorks?"

"Boy, what a lively, back-breaking project that'd be."

"Somebody has to do it. And we're in a better position than anybody else. We can steal a ship with one of their disintegrator guns, take it down to earth, learn how to make them, organize an attack—"

"It'll have to be some other guy, sister. Some other George Washington."

"You really mean," she said incredulously, "you don't care one bit about the people still left on Earth?"

"You hit it on the head, sister. I don't know them and I'm not going to start bleeding for them. I'm sure they're not bleeding for me."

That seemed to settle her. But a little later, as he was easing into a preliminary doze, she said, drearily, "You might be interested to know how I was intending to work it. You might be interested. It was all very scientific, really. I was going to begin acting friendly toward you when the Gorks came out. I was going to make them think it was safe to put us together. Then,



as soon as they unlocked the doors, I was going to paralyze them. All you would have to do would be unbolt this connecting passage, push it aside, and we'd both go free. The scientists' spaceship is parked less than a mile from here."

She seemed to be through now. Rob joggled his shoulders into a more comfortable position.

"You're not even going to ask how I was going to paralyze them?" she scolded. "You might at least be curious, just to prove you've *something* human left in you. . . I was going to do it with brain waves. The Grorks are very susceptible to the slower waves. Maybe you noticed how those Grorks froze up when I was fighting with you. That was because I was breathing heavily and my brain waves were slowed down. It's a common observation in our laboratory that if a person skips a meal to make his blood sugar go low, and then breathes deeply for a few minutes, his brain waves decrease from the normal ten per second down to one to six per second. Well, I accidentally found out that these slow waves affect the Grorks at a considerable distance. They shake all over, drop anything they're holding, and then finally become paralyzed. They stay that way as long as you keep breathing deeply.

"The way I happened to discover the effect was about a month ago, when that tall Grork—the one that seems to be the chief of those scientists—when he tried to come into my cage and I fought him off."

"What'd he do that for?" Rob said reluctantly.

"He. . . to use your expression. . . wanted to get friendly with me."

"He really tried to do that?" Rob muttered. "The dirty beast."

"He did no more than what you tried to do," she said bitterly.

"That's different. They're bugs, for heaven's sake."

She made a low, harsh sound. It seemed to be a kind of laugh. It was

so peculiar, so disturbing, he had to roll around and have a look at her.

"You happen to have been my last hope of getting back to Earth," she said. "My last hope but one."

"What d'you mean—your last hope but one?"

"There's just one more way left." She shrugged. "I imagine it'll work—I imagine he'll do it for me if—"

"Who'll do what?"

"That Grork—the one who was so taken by me."

Rob slowly sat up. "Wait a minute—what're you talking about?"

"I'm going back to Earth," she said grimly. "I don't care what I have to do."

"Hey, you don't know what you're saying! I'm not going to stand for anything like that."

"You? What business is it of yours?"

"What—what business of mine? What're you talking about? You're a person, aren't you? You're—you're. . . my kind, aren't you?"

"I'm going back home," she said quietly, "one way or another."

His heart was pounding—pounding in a manner he'd completely forgotten. "There's one way you're *not* going," he said through tight teeth. "I'm not letting any goddamn bug touch you, even if I have to take you home myself."

The girl looked at him with big, dazed eyes.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Never mind the talk," he growled. "Call out those bugs—you know their language—call them out and let's get to work. We've got lots to do."

"Oh, Rob! You're wonderful!"

"No hearts and flowers, please!"

As the sleek ship knifed into the darkening sky, Rob turned from the controls and said, "You might be heading for an awful disappointment, you know—we might get there and find there aren't any people left at all."

"If that should be the case," she said, "I. . . think perhaps it won't stay that way indefinitely. What is the phrase you used. . . Adam and Eve. . .?"

# MESSSENGIER

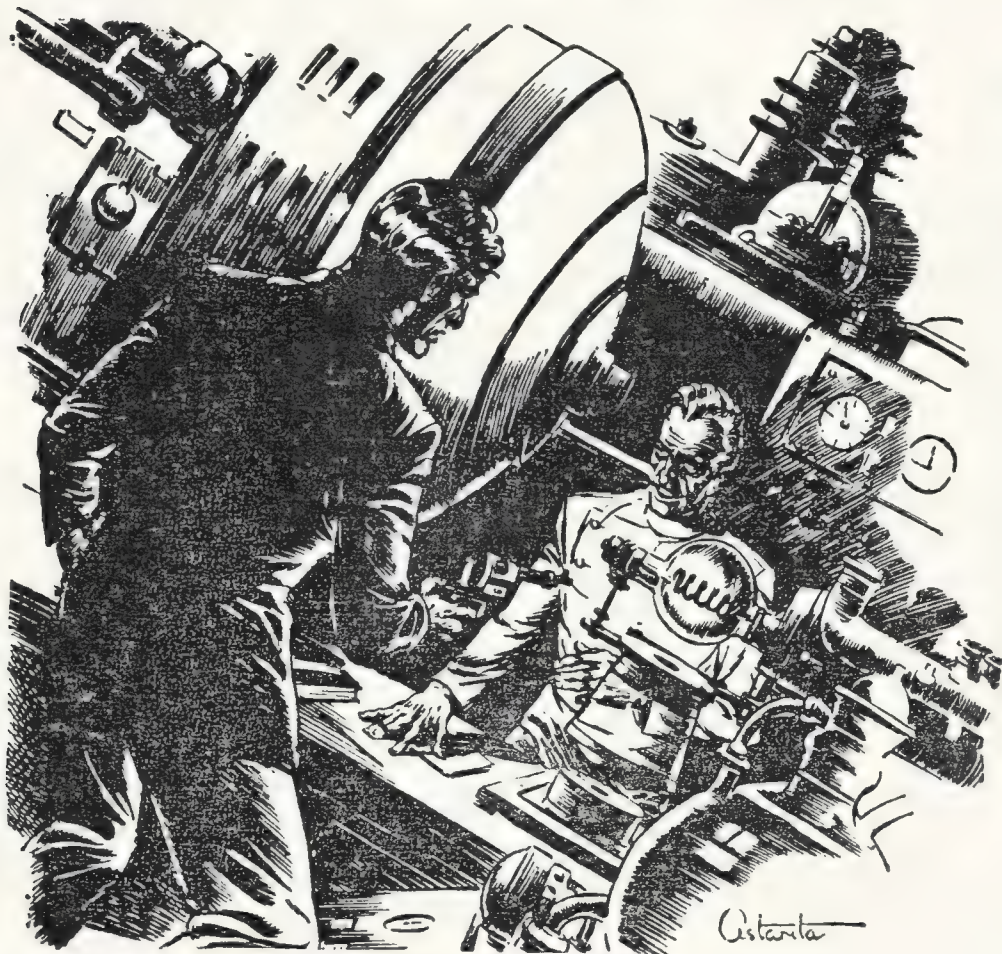
BY THEODORE STURGEON

*There is more than one way to skin a rat — as the old scientist discovers*

THE TWO guns spoiled the lines of Bentow's carefully fitted coat. No one but he and his tailor would have noticed it, but he would be happy when he had used them and had done with the whole business.

He stepped out of the administrative

corridor into the south end of Generator Room No. 5, and glanced down its enormous length. The great dynamos crouched off into distance like an avenue of hulking houses. A slight movement in the gleaming street between them made Bentow step back into the corridor.



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After an interminable wait old Zeitz, the section night watchman, trudged by, his eyes cast down, his ancient legs transmuting these indoor distances into his rounds just as mechanically as the purring monsters about him turned motion into power.

When he had gone, Bentow put his sleek head out of the corridor again, and then stepped into the room. Staying close to the aluminum-clad wall, he walked quickly to the end of the room and along it to the open doorway of Condenser Station No. 48, where his inspection route charts had shown him that Auckland Ford should be.

Ford, straight and gray, was there standing with his level eyes on the instrument panel inside. He turned in surprise as Bentow stepped inside.

"Well," he said, smiling, "You're about the last person I ever expected to see where the work gets done."

Bentow forced himself to return the smile. "Public relations isn't all cocktails and stuffed shirts, Mr. Ford," he said. "I worked right through midnight tonight, and since I was at the plant, I thought I'd bone up a little on how things work. You'd be surprised how many technical questions are asked at those cocktail parties."

"So this is research? Well, I'm glad to help. This is the first thing you've done that I can like, Bentow."

"You really do dislike me, don't you?" Bentow said frowning.

"I didn't say that," said Ford. "I just don't give a hang one way or the other. Hope I'm not being too frank."

"Not at all," said Bentow stiffly. He wet his lips. "Your daughter appears to have a certain amount of respect for me."

"That isn't respect," said Ford bluntly. "She's too young to know what respect is. She can understand authority and she knows who brings the feed pan. But if she wants to marry you, it's all right with me. You're not a bad catch. You've got a good income, a really impressive array of false front, and plenty of good looks. Dorcas is a

sweet kid, but I faced the fact long ago that she's not too bright."

"She is everything in the world I want," said Bentow solemnly.

"Good," said Ford. "And, by Heaven, I expect you to behave accordingly, or you'll answer to me!"

Overhead a horn honked—a series of five unpleasant beeps.

"That's my call," said Ford. "Early. My reports not due for another ten minutes. Just a second, Bentow."

He stalked out the low doorway and took down the phone which hung outside. Bentow shuffled his feet nervously and then moved to the far bulkhead, where he would be out of sight of the generator room. Ford was back in a moment.

"Just a reminder that the manifold in eighty-seven needs a special inspection," he said.

"Did you tell them I was here?" Bentow asked.

"I did not. It wasn't a social call."

"But you'll make your routine report ten minutes from now?"

"Of course."

"Just wondered," said Bentow, and thought to himself, "I'd better wait until after he reports. Killing ten minutes will give me a little practice. Do my killing by stages—"

"Well, what did you want to know?" asked Ford.

"Oh—I know pretty much the general principles," said Bentow. "A mercury-vapor power plant using the atomic-pile heat from the transmutation factory. But tell me about these condenser stations, just as if I were some curious bubblehead at a cocktail party."

FORD gave him a somewhat pitying look, and finally said, "All right, Mr. Curious Bubblehead from a cocktail party." He grinned while Bentow winced. "These stations are not the condensers themselves; those are all underneath. But the mercury lines pass through here—high-pressure ones to the turbines, low-pressure ones to the exhaust chambers.

of the condensers. These stations check the pressures on each, all the time."

"What exactly for?" Bentow queried.

"Well, the pressure data are matched with generator output to determine the working efficiency; with mercury-flow checks to determine the volatilization rate—that has everything to do with the chemical purity of the mercury—and, most of all, to check for leaks."

"Yes. I know that's important. The stuff is quick poison at those pressures."

"Mercury vapor is poison at any pressure," said Ford. "But at these pressures—" he pointed to the great trunks of the ducts which led through the back wall and down into the floor—"750 pounds per square inch to the turbines, and a mere 60 pounds for exhaust, the vapor can reach a lethal concentration like *that!*" and he snapped his long fingers. "The tiniest pin hole in one of those trunks over there would mean a deadly concentration of vapor here in seconds!"

"And how long would it take to kill a man?" Bentow asked curiously.

"Only a few minutes."

"But any of you operators can smell the stuff before it gets dangerous, can't you?"

"No. A concentration of only one part in one hundred thousand in air is dangerous. A man would be seriously poisoned by the time he felt anything at all," said Ford.

Bentow thought this over for a moment before asking, "Well, what protects you?"

Ford pointed to a small box, screened, on a shelf. Blue-white light hovered around it. "Ikey does," he said.

"Oh, yes—the spectral detector. Just how does it work?"

"Well, you know how dark lines show up on a spectroscope?"

"I think so," said Bentow. "If you put a sheet of cadmium-tinted glass over your spectroscope and shoot the sun, you'll get dark lines on the cadmium sector of the solar spectrum."

"That's roughly the idea. Well, Ikey there has a photo-electric cell with a mercury filter over it. Trained on it is a mercury-vapor lamp. If any trace of mercury vapor occurs in the air in here, the value of the light that reaches the cell changes because of the spectral lines which occur behind the filter. Then Ikey goes into action."

Bentow looked at his elaborate wrist watch. He knew all this, but it didn't hurt to check again while he waited.

"Well, first of all he sets up a yell,"

Ford continued. "There are screechers all around the plant; if you've ever heard one once you'll never forget it. Then he automatically shuts the door to this station and starts blowers to change the air."

"Shuts the door? But suppose someone is in here?"

"There's a push-button outside the door, by the phone."

"Oh yes," said Bentow. "I noticed it. It has a light over it."

"That's right. Well, when I come in here I push it. The light lights, and if anything should happen in here the door will stay open until I can get out and push the button. If I should be hurt, someone else will be along but quick, fish me out, and close the door. But if no one is here, the door will close as soon as the alarm starts."

"Ah," said Bentow. "And suppose you forget to push the button when you first come in?"

"You *don't* forget," said Ford grimly.

The overhead horn sounded a series of five beeps again.

"My report," said Ford.

"Don't mention that I'm here," said Bentow swiftly. "This is a little irregular, you know."

"More irregular for me than for you," said Ford. "I'm working. Don't worry, I won't." He went out.

**B**ENTOW shifted the guns in his side pockets tensely, and leaned back against the bulkhead. "I'm working," he muttered under his breath.

Why should Auckland Ford work?



he wondered. The man was brilliant; had been ever since his youth, when, as the winner of a talent search, he had done that phenomenal job on heat-transfer devices. A lot of that work was built into this very plant—the slow viscous flow of Fordium, as it was called, from the pile jackets to the mercury boilers was Ford's development. The heavy stuff was incredibly stable, and absorbed little radiation from the hellish fury of the piles. It transferred plenty of heat and a negligible amount of radiation to the boilers.

Ford was a wealthy man—one of the wealthiest in this part of the world. But what did he do with his money? Gave it away, a lot of it. The rest moldered in banks, awaiting yet another of his fantastically generous impulses. The charity called Providence had benefited, no one knew how much, from Ford's gifts.

Providence, with its subsidies of pure science, or applied science in any field which furthered the humanities—such as a lie-detector which was now accepted by the courts; nine specialized cancer cures, a bombardment technique which preserved food in cellophane jackets without refrigeration, and so on and on.

And now, according to the word that Ford's pretty but slightly stupid daughter had dropped, Ford was going to will everything he owned to Providence, as soon as Julius, his attorney, returned from the coast, which would be this week. And what did he, Bentow, want with that empty-headed doll without her enormous inheritance?

Bentow glanced around the bare room. There were the two huge mercury trunks. There was Ikey, the detector, who would start to yell when one part of mercury vapor in two billion of air showed itself. He would like very much to impair Ikey's efficiency, but did not dare. Ikey would be one of the first things inspected after the "accident."

Aside from the pressure indicators,

there was very little else in the room, except a spanner or two and a small first-aid kit. Bentow nodded in satisfaction.

Ford came in, his long gray eyes going immediately to the gauges. Apparently satisfied, he turned to Bentow.

"Anything else you wanted to know?" he asked.

"Only one thing I wanted to be sure of. If there's a leak and the doors close, how long do they stay closed?"

"Twelve hours, as a matter of safety. The boiler lines are diverted as soon as three others can be slowed down and this boiler's output diverted to them."

"During that time, you say the blowers will be replacing the air in here," Bentow said. "Does the alarm keep on sounding until the concentration is down below one part in two billion?"

"Gosh, no!" grinned Ford. "We'd be out of our minds if it did. No—as soon as the door closes the alarm is shut off, except for light signals which indicate which station has the trouble. Unless, of course, the concentration continues to rise. Then Ikey sounds off again."

"I see," said Bentow, who had known it before but was glad of the final check. "One more thing—and this is just personal curiosity; don't answer me unless you want to. But why do you work here?"

Ford smiled, and his cool gaze pinned Bentow. "I wouldn't really expect you to understand," he said quietly. "It's just that I found out very early that there is nothing that can destroy a human being but excess. Alcohol won't hurt you, drunkenness will. Work won't hurt you, exhaustion will. And so on through everything a man eats, thinks, drinks, and breathes.

"And there is such a thing as too much success and too much money," he went on. "You don't believe that, I know. I've worked all my life. I don't live a Spartan existence—that's an extreme—but I haven't let myself get soft. My company pension comes

due soon, and it'll be enough. I'm getting rid of everything else. I don't need it. I have my home and my lab and a lot of things to interest me. That's all I want. But there are thousands of other people who want and need my surplus money; they can have it. It'll do them good and it could only harm me—like any excess."

"It really is true, then, that you're turning over everything you have to Providence?" Bentow questioned.

"That's right. Did Dorcas tell you?"

"Yes. But why Providence?"

Ford laughed. "I don't know why I tell you this. No one else knows. Providence is mine. I founded it."

**B**ENTOW'S eyes popped, and Ford laughed again. "But that must have taken millions!" Bentow gasped.

"I just had some good ideas." Ford's eyes speared into Bentow again. "I know what you're thinking. That money meant so much rich living, so much yachting, so much social climbing—not for me, Bentow. I'm a working man."

Bentow's eyes glowed strangely. "I think you're crazy."

Ford shrugged. "You would. You have never learned the meaning of 'enough'."

"Does Dorcas feel the same way you do?"

"She doesn't feel," said Auckland Ford positively. "Easy come, easy go—she's always been a happy, or slap-happy, child. Maybe some day she'll get a jolt big enough to give her some sense. I don't believe in jolting people who are close to me, personally. It's useless to take sense to your intimates. They'll only listen to strangers." He shrugged. "Dorcas is good," he said. "Sooner or later, that will show up."

Bentow took the gun from his left jacket pocket. A corner of his mind appreciated the fact that his jacket now fell to its correct cut.

Ford said, in surprise, "That's mine!"

"Dorcas took me on an extensive

tour of your laboratory," said Bentow. "These long evenings at home, when you're on the night shift—"

"That gun will never be good for anything," said Ford. "Not as a weapon, anyway. Industrially it might have some use—if anyone wants a tool that will penetrate fifty inches of molyb steel with a hole a thousandth of an inch in diameter."

"What about this one?" Bentow drew the other, and the sartorial corner of his mind heaved a satisfied sigh.

"I don't deal in weapons," said Ford. "Can't say I'm crazy about the idea of your just picking these up."

"No one knows I've got them—not even Dorcas," said Bentow. "This one," he added persistently. "A paralysis device, isn't it?"

"That's what it turned out to be," said Ford glumly. "I was fooling with subsonics for anaesthetic purposes. I suppose you know the police now carry that one as standard equipment. Causes a temporary derangement of the motor centers. What the deuce are you doing with it?"

Bentow smiled. "Only this," he said, and pressed the thumb-stud.

Ford stood stiffly, almost as he always stood. But now his mouth opened slowly, his tongue protruded and began to oscillate violently. His long, narrow eyes widened until they were almost perfectly round. His hands curled, tensed, straightened, stiffened. He overbalanced slowly, like a tall tree just sawed through, fell to lean stiffly a moment against the bulkhead, and then jackknifed to the floor.

"I know you can hear me," said Bentow smugly, putting away the paralysis gun. "You just can't move. Don't worry, that will only last two or three minutes. I wish I could be here to see what the great Brain will do then. The place will be full of mercury vapor, and that so carefully designed hermetically sealed door will be closed. Pound against it all you wish—no one will hear you. The phone's outside, the door



controls are outside, and no one will know you're here."

He paused, cocking his shining head to one side as if listening.

"Oh," he said, pretending the other had spoken. "You want to know why? Well, Mr. Brilliant Scientist, it seems that you are about to leave all of your considerable fortune to a thing called Providence, with the bland idea that I shall be able to support your dear daughter on my wages in the manner to which she has become accustomed. My dear Mr. Ford, I intend to do much better than that—with the money which she will now inherit!"

He still held the other gun. He walked over the trunk duct marked "HP" for "High Pressure" and fired twice. There was no sound—simply a line of blue light so fine it was almost invisible.

"Those," he said, putting the gun in his pocket, "will be attributed to pressure leakage. Because you were afraid that this thing would be used as a weapon, you have kept its performance characteristics secret, and I assure you that all of your records will be destroyed before I go on my honeymoon.

"I must go now." An ugly smirk was on his face. "I am sincerely sorry that I cannot stay to see what you do when you come out of the paralysis. I would, but I can't think of jeopardizing the health of your future, if post-mortem, son-in-law."

He waved his hand jauntily and stepped into the generator room. He called back, "What amuses me most in this dramatic situation is that you are being killed by two of your own inventions, in a plant which is possible because of a third. A happy suicide to you!"

**H**E STOOD tensely by the doorway. Turning, he pushed the button there. The light went out. Then he sprinted to the corner and down the generator room to the administrative corridor.

There he waited until there came a

harrowing mechanical scream which went on and on and on. A red light flared over the door of the station he had just left, and its ponderous door slid shut with a clang. Through the clamor of the screecher he could hear the pound of running feet. He turned and sprinted up the corridor to his office. The light still burned there.

He opened the closet and took out his overcoat. With one arm into it, he went to the door which gave on to the general offices and opened it a crack. There were voices outside.

"A leak," someone said out there. It was old Zeitz, the night watchman. "Stay right here, Sam. There was a blowoff out Hancord oncet where they phoned up an alarm to get the guards outen the offices, so's they could steal secret files. You stay right here till I git back, an' grab anyone thet come in, no matter who."

"I got you," said a bass voice.

Peering around the door, Bentow could see the shadowy hulk of the younger guard, and knew immediately that his, Bentow's, kind of brains would be useless against that particular one hundred and ninety pounds.

Bentow shucked out of his coat and put it away. He was not going to go out into the generator room, with guards and techs converging on Condenser Station No. 48, and he couldn't leave while that big guard was out there. His office was soundproof; he would simply pretend to be working late until all of the excitement died away, or express profound regret about the whole thing if someone came in accidentally.

Not that anyone would. In a technological emergency, no one would dream of calling the public relations office, even during office hours.

He settled back into his swivel chair, and smiled.

A half an hour later he screamed when Auckland Ford tottered into his office.

Ford, with his long face flushed and his once-clear eyes shot with blood,

smiled a ghastly smile, Bentow screamed again, tried to huddle away, upset his swivel chair and cowered in a sobbing heap in the corner.

Men poured in, to catch Ford as he fell, to snatch the sodden Bentow to his feet and hold him.

From a deep easy-chair, with solicitous technicians around him, Ford glared redly at Bentow. "Well, Bentow, did you hear it?" he said.

"Hear what?" quavered Bentow.

Jackson, the swarthy plant super, said, "He means the screecher, when it gave his code call."

"This office is soundproof," said Bentow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ford's breath took on a wheeze. Jackson said, "I'll tell you, Bentow. Ford doesn't want to go to the hospital until he knows you've been told what happened. Can't say I blame him." His lips curled. He went on, "He found himself locked in that cell with the vapor concentration mounting. He'd been knocked down by a paralyzer but—" awe entered his voice—"that didn't keep his brain from working. When he could move again he found himself in a real spot."

"I'd have written your name on the floor," rasped Ford at Bentow, "but I didn't have anything to write with. Not even a spanner would make an impression on the stuff."

"You rest easy," said a guard, with his hand on Ford's shoulder.

"Yeah, I'll tell it," said Jackson. He turned back to the sweating Bentow. "He tried to write on the floor, first of all, and lost minutes at it. When I *think* of it!" he exploded. "All of us milling around outside, and the door closed, and none of us dreaming that there might be anyone inside! The screecher giving the alarm, and then dying out, and all of us nodding at each other and saying, 'Well, we'll get to her at noon tomorrow.' And all the while he—"

He thumbed over his shoulder at Ford, who grinned weakly.

"The medicine chest," Ford whispered. "Only thing there was in the place." He laughed horribly. "I took a—" He began to cough.

JACKSON said again, "I'll tell it. We were about to go back to our stations when the screecher started up again. That meant only that the leak was getting ahead of the blowers, at first. But none of us had ever heard the screecher like that. Hinks here spotted it."

Hinks, the guard, nodded and, oddly, blushed. "It went *Awk. Awk-awk-awk. Awk.*"

His imitation of the alarm screecher was so startlingly accurate that every man in the room jumped. Hinks blushed again and tittered, pulled himself together and said:

"It done it again, and a third time, and all of a sudden I remembered that was Mr. Ford's code-call on the beeper."

"Very—" said Bentow, and then his voice failed him. He swallowed hard and tried again. "Very ingenious. What has that to do with me?"

"It was Ikey, said Ford from his chair. "Ikey's like a light meter. Hold one candle one foot away, the meter'll say one foot-candle. Hold twenty candles twenty feet away, it'll still say one foot candle." He ran out of breath.

"Yeah," said Jackson, "all Ikey knows is the concentration of mercury vapor in that little air space between the light and the cell. Mr. Ford took the thermometer—why they put a fever thermometer in all these local first-aid kits I'll never know, but they're standard—and he broke it and held a little pool of mercury smaller'n a dime under the beam of Ikey's light."

"Shielded it off with a piece of my shirt," whispered Ford. "As primitive as Indian smoke signals. The little bit of mercury that vaporizes at room temperature drove Ikey into hysterics when it was that close to the beam."

"I still don't see what this has to do

(Continued on page 71)





# CONTINUED STORY

BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR

*Somewhere an alien intelligence hated him — but who? Where? And Why?*

**T**HE Martian invader was still following him. Its slender, fantastically lacy outline had whisked back into the shadow of the garbage can on the corner only a minute before.

Milton Delisle drew a shuddering breath. The invader made him feel such intense, nervous apprehension that he wanted to scream or break into tears. But it stood to reason that the thing wouldn't try to follow him into the police station—it seemed to be

shy about anyone seeing it except him and Marilyn—and its broadcasts could reach only so far. And after he'd confessed he'd be safe because they'd put him in a cell. The cell would be nice and quiet. He hesitated a moment longer on the steps of the station. Then he went in.

The desk sergeant was a young, thick-set man who loved criminology and privately thought his job the most fascinating in the world. He would rather have died than admit to any-

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thing but boredom in connection with it. He had a romantic temperament. When Milton entered, he put down the copy of *Psychiatry and the Criminal* he had been reading, and yawned cavernously. "Yeah?" he said.

"I want to give myself up."

The sergeant was instantly irascible. "Go on, get out," he said. "Who the hell do you think you're fooling? Get out."

"No, but listen. It's not a rib. I've been in here before. You can ask Fred Deeder in plainclothes—he knows me. He picked me up last year for petty theft. And I've really done something this time.

"Recidivist, eh?"

"Re—I guess so. Anyhow, I want to give myself up."

Deeder's name—a very sound man, interested in psychology—had soothed the sergeant. He said, "Well, what did you do?"

"I pilked three boxes of—toys, I guess you'd call them—from the toy shop in the seven hundred block on Fulton Street. Saturday night."

This time the sergeant really was angry. He got up from behind the desk. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Get out before I throw you out. There's no toy shop in the seven hundred block on Fulton. I know. I live near there. Whatsa matter, you a masochist?"

Milt Delisle had begun to sweat. He pulled the neatly folded blue handkerchief with the corded border from his breast pocket and swabbed at his forehead with it. "Yeah, but *listen*," he said pleadingly. "I know there's no toy shop there now. Marylin and I went back there on Monday and looked up and down both sides of the street for it, and we couldn't find it. But there was one there on Saturday night. There really was."

"Hunh. You must be junked."

"That's one thing I don't do and never did," Milt said virtuously. "You ask Deeder. He knows about me. Lis-

ten, why don't you just listen while I tell you about it? And then you can book me for theft." He looked over his shoulder nervously, toward the outside of the station. The Martian invader was neither broadcasting nor in sight.

"Pretty eager to get booked, aren't you?" the sergeant commented. But he sat down again.

MILTON coughed and cleared his throat. "The toy store, the way it was on Saturday night, was a great big place," he said. "It was two or maybe three store fronts wide, and it was nothing but glass on the outside. Inside it was soft pink and pale blue and lavender lights, and lots of mirrors. Marylin said—"

"Who's Marylin?" the sergeant interrupted. "Dame ya shacked up with?"

"No," Delisle replied with a touch of coldness. "We're married, since last year. Seven bucks the license cost me."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Think nothing of it," Milt returned magnanimously. "We all make mistakes. That's why they got ink erasers. Well as I was saying, Marylin said she didn't see how a swell-looking store like that could do enough business in the part of town where it was to keep going, and I said I thought so too. We looked in the window a while—there were all sorts of big dolls dressed in shiny stuff and stuffed animals as big as life, nearly, in funny colors, and sets of gold and blue building blocks—and then Marylin suggested we go in. She said some of the wire toys we couldn't figure out the way they worked looked interesting, and she thought there might be some good kits inside. Marylin loves kits."

"Mee-ows?" the sergeant asked.

"Naw, kits. You know, building kits. Last year we made a model airplane—it flies good—and before we were married she made copper trays and leathercraft. That kind of kits.

"So we went in. The place was



about three times as big inside as it looked from the outside. It was as big as a couple of barns. There was so much stuff we couldn't take it all in. But there was only one clerk.

"He was an ugly little sawed off guy with a big head, big pale eyes, and little bitty ears. He was dressed in a skinny green suit without any buttons. I don't know how he got in and out of it.

"Marylin and me sort of stopped when we saw him, because he was so funny looking. When he saw us, he smiled with his mouth tight. He didn't come up and start waiting on us, though—I guess he saw we wanted to look around. We liked that.

"You never saw so many kinds of different toys. A kid would just have gone crazy in there. There were building toys where you could make a whole funny big city in ten minutes, and toys to ride in with water around like submarines, and toys where you pressed a button and it made a lot of different shows—you could change the color and lighting and people by pressing other buttons—and toys so funny it made your head hurt to try to figure them out. In a way, all the toys were funny. I've got an idea about that stuff in the toy shop."

"What?" the sergeant demanded.

"Tell you later. When I get to it. Anyhow, there were all sorts of toys. The prices they wanted for the stuff were terrific, though. Off at the left there were three or four tables, big ones, with nothing but kits."

Milton ran his finger around the inside of his collar. "Now, I know I promised Deeder I wouldn't. I hated to break my promise. But you got to consider the prices they wanted for the stuff. Why, it was just robbery. Two or three hundred dollars for just a kit in a box. I knew I'd never be able to afford that kind of thing. Too rich for my blood."

"So you pinched the toys instead?" the sergeant asked sarcastically.

"Well—yes. I didn't feel too bad over it. With prices like that, they ought to be taught a lesson. And I knew the wife would get a bang out of the kits. I waited until she was over in a corner, looking at some puzzles made of glass, and the clerk was looking the other way. Then I lifted them.

"I knew Marylin would raise the roof if she thought I'd pilked. So I went and stood near the clerk for a while, like I might be buying something. Then I told her I'd picked out some stuff for us, for a surprise, and we could go. There wasn't any trouble. The clerk wasn't even looking at us."

"What did ya take?" the sergeant asked. "Some of the puzzles made of glass?"

**D**ELISLE shook his head. "No, they looked too hard. I pilked three kits I thought we could work. The first was just for Marylin. It was a box of makeup things, with maybe twenty-five or thirty packages and jars of make-up stuff inside and a made-up face on the cover. It was—it was a pretty face. But—" Milton ran his finger around his collar twice and swallowed. "I dunno. Even then it sort of scared me. I thought the kit was make-up for theatricals, and I thought Marylin would get a kick out of it, because she likes cosmetics and make-up stuff. But I dunno. I don't know who that kit could ever have been made for.

"The second kit was for a model—well, not exactly a model, more like a cast—of a scene on the moon. There was a package of powder in the kit and some heavy-looking stuff, like fixatif, to mix it with. There weren't any directions in the box, just the picture on the cover and the words 'Self-Setting Lunar Experience,' but I didn't think we'd get into any trouble with it. It looked easy to do."

"Lunar *experience*?" questioned the sergeant. "Not landscape?"

"Yeah, that's right. It was spelled funny, but that's what it said.

"That kit was for me, because I've always been interested in the moon, but I thought Marylin would enjoy it too. The third one, the robot, was for both of us.

"It was a box with pieces inside like an erector set, only spindly and thinner, like black steel lace, and there was a diagram with numbers on the inside of the cover to show you how to put it together. When you got it done it was a robot. You know, a tin man. Only it was taller and lacier than robots usually are." Milt glanced back toward the street and licked his lips uneasily.

"You mean a rowbow," the sergeant corrected. "It's French. In French, you never say the last part of the words."

"Oh. Rowbow, then. When we got home we looked at our kits. Marylin was just crazy about her make-up box. She said she wanted to save it until Sunday, when she'd have plenty of time to fool around with it. So we decided to do the moon kit that night.

"Marylin got a mixing bowl and a pie plate from the cupboard—we got a room with a kitchenette—and I started to mix the powder with the liquid in the kit. It was as hard as pulling teeth to mix.

"The powder was a brownish putty colored stuff, full of lumps. The liquid was heavy and piled up on the powder and didn't want to get smooth. I had to stir so hard to mix it that the spatula that was in the kit got bent. But finally I got it done and we poured it out in the pie plate. Then we had to wait.

"For ten minutes or so nothing happened. Marylin got bored. She gave a couple of sighs. And then, all of a sudden, it began to set.

"It was a little like watching mush boiling. There were holes in it—craters—and splotches and rays going out from the craters. They changed while you watched for a while. Pretty soon

the surface got hard and shiny and we thought that was going to be all. It looked like one of those big photographs of the moon, only close up.

"Marylin said, 'Gee, that was fun, Milt. You picked a swell surprise,' and I said, 'Glad you liked it, baby. We'll do—' And then I didn't say anything more, because I was down there on the moon."

"What do you mean, you were down there on the moon?" the desk sergeant demanded. "You mean you were up on the moon in the sky? Or you were down there in the pie dish? Which?"

"Both," Delisle said. "I mean, I was up on the moon in the sky—there wasn't any air and the sky was black and the light coming off the rocks and ground made my eyes hurt—and at the same time I knew it was the moon in the pie dish. Both."

"Well, go on."

I WAS wearing one of those space suits. I could breathe pretty well, but the air smelled like metal. When I walked, I made big duck leaps. I didn't seem to weigh much. And when I landed, my feet went down six or eight inches in the soft gray dust.

"I was scared. As soon as I knew I was on the moon, I got scared. Not because I was there, you understand—that might have been fun, in a way. It was other things. I knew somebody I couldn't see was watching me."

"From where?"

"From over my head. That was bad enough. But I knew that somebody else than that, somebody who was really there, was after me."

"There were two of them?" the sergeant asked.

"I guess so. One was the invisible one, who was just watching, curious and cold. The other was a man in a space suit, somebody who was down on the moon with me, and he was after my hide. I didn't know who he was or what he had against me, but



I was sure of it. It was like I'd been on the moon a long time. And then a bullet—a red flash of light, really—went past my ear. I wasn't just imagining it.

"I reached down by the side of my suit and found I had a gun myself, a sort of pistol with a flaring mouth, in a holster. I got it out and fired at where I thought the red flash had come from. A piece of rock broke off. It took a long time to fall. And then another flash went past the side of my head.

"I dodged around behind a big gray rock and fired again. I couldn't see him at all. It was terrible. I've pilked stuff sometimes, sure, but I never hurt anybody, and I never did anything that would make anybody want to hurt me. And now this fellow I couldn't see was trying to kill me!" Milt shook his head sadly.

"We went on that way, dodging in and out among the rocks and shooting, for what seemed like hours. Now and then I'd hear somebody laugh. It was a nasty noise.

"I was getting tired, and my suit didn't have enough air. I knew if he ever hit the suit I'd die because the air would leave it. I thought he must be getting tired, too, though, and that cheered me up. Then I noticed that the light was leaving the rocks and I was having trouble seeing. And it came to me with an awful shock: it was getting dark.

"I'd thought I'd been scared before, but I hadn't. I was so scared my knees shook. I didn't see how I could stand being on the moon all night, with not enough air in my suit and another man in a suit trying to kill me. The worst of it was I had no idea how long the night would last. It might be only a few hours, or it might be a couple of weeks, or it might be a month. I just didn't know how night on the moon worked. But I was afraid it would last a month.

"Like I said, I didn't see how I

could stand it. So I came out from behind the rock—it was still a little bit light—and started after him."

"Hunh?"

"I was too scared to do anything else," Milt said simply. "I went hopping along toward him, taking as big jumps as I could, and he fired at me a couple of times. I don't know how he happened to miss. Then I was right on top of him and he fired once more. This time he got me in the right arm.

"I could feel the air leaving. I didn't care, so long as I could get rid of him. I got him by the neck—he was bigger than I was—and started choking. I could see spots and gray patches in front of my eyes, but I held on.

"The next thing I knew, Marylin was shaking me by the arms and saying, 'Wake up honey, do wake up,' over and over again. She sounded scared. I opened my eyes and there I was in my chair, just the same as I'd been before I got down there on the moon.

"I looked at Marylin. She really was scared. I never saw her so white. She said I'd been sitting there for about ten minutes, my eyes fixed on the pie plate, like I was in a kind of a trance. She hadn't been able to get me to speak to her or anything.

"I asked her to get us some soda out of the ice box. We drank it, and I told her what had been happening. She didn't seem much surprised—she said she knew something was mighty queer. We threw the pie plate with the landscape in it in the garbage, and we decided we'd take the other two kits back to the toy store on Monday. She said we could get our money back. I told her I didn't care about that.

SUNDAY she kept opening her make-up kit and looking at it and putting it away again. It fascinated her, I guess. It really was an awfully interesting looking thing

with all those little pots and boxes. Anyhow, on Monday we went back to Fulton where the store had been, and we couldn't find it. We looked up and down on both sides of the street for about three blocks. It just wasn't there. There was a package goods store and a fruit stand where it had been.

"We took the kits on back home. We passed a couple of trash cans on the way. Marylin said, 'We ought to throw those kits away right now,' and I said, 'Yeah. we ought.' But we didn't. Neither of us even slowed up. We just walked on past. I don't know why we didn't throw those kits away, when we knew we should."

"People don't always do what they ought to," the desk sergeant said sagely. "They got masochistic drives."

"I guess. Or maybe something wouldn't let us."

"When we got home Marylin got us some supper. All the time we were eating she seemed restless. I turned on the radio, but she made me shut it off. Pretty soon she said, 'Milt. I'm going to make up my face with some of the things in the kit.'

"I said, 'Honey, do you think you'd better? It might be dangerous, like the moon. How about my helping you with the dishes? And then we'll go take in a movie.'

"She gave me the darndest look. She never looked like that at me before, in all the time I've known her. 'You never want me to have anything I want, do you?' she answered. Her voice was bitter and hard. 'You're always against me. You grudge me every little thing.'

"I didn't say anything more. There wasn't anything I could say. I got the paper and sat there trying to read while she opened boxes and tubes and jars in the make-up kit. After a while—fixing her face the way she wanted it took her a long, long time—I got a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard and had myself a drink.

"I couldn't even taste it. It might

just as well have been water. And I couldn't make myself pretend to read the paper any longer. I felt too tense. I folded up the paper and put it on the table and set the whiskey bottle down beside it. And I watched Marylin.

"She was sitting with her back to me, at the dressing table. I couldn't see her face except in the mirror, but she'd put on a cosmetic, lipstick or eyeshadow or something, look at it a minute, and then wipe it off again. With all the pains she was taking, she ought to have been as pretty as a picture, but she wasn't. I could only see her in the mirror, but I thought that each new thing she did to herself made her look—well—worse.

"The longer I waited for her, the more I got the jitters. Pretty soon I began to get the feeling I'd had when I was down on the moon, the feeling that somebody I couldn't see was watching us. I told myself that I was imagining it, that all there was in the room was me and Marylin, putting a lot of funny cosmetics on her face. It didn't help. I still felt it. That being watched by somebody you can't see is a nasty feeling to get.

"Finally, when I felt I'd go crazy if I had to wait any longer, Marylin turned round. 'Take a good look, Milt,' she said.

"The first thing that struck me was how *bright* her face was. It glittered all over as if she'd dipped it in diamond dust. From under her eyes there was a reddish sparkle, and her cheeks were a shiny fine pale green, but the rest of her face, including her lips, was a dead, dazzling blue-white. It was like she was wearing a mask set with hundreds of diamonds. Only her eyebrows were a flat, solid black.

"I sat there staring at her. She was horrible. She made me feel frozen right down to my feet. And yet I was crazy about her too. She was wonderful."

"Crazy?" the sergeant asked incred-



ulously. "When she looked like that?"

"Yes. I didn't want her, I didn't like her, she wasn't Marylin. And yet there was a kind of lure coming out from her, a lure I just couldn't resist. If she'd told me to do anything, I'd have had to do it. If she'd said, 'Go over to the window and throw yourself out,' I'd have done it. I hated the way she made me feel. It was like being in love with a fish."

"Well, go on."

"We looked at each other for a minute. She was smiling a little. Then she laughed.

**I**T WAS a perfectly normal laugh, just the way she always laughed, and yet it gave me the creeps almost worse than her face did or the way her face made me feel. There was something extra unnatural about her pretty, light laugh coming out of a face like that.

"She knew I was crazy about her, and hated her. She sat there smiling. She enjoyed it. In a smooth, soft voice she said, 'Milt, lie down on the floor.'"

"I got down. I could hear my knees creaking—I got stiff joints—and the floor was draughty and hard. From where my head was I could see some rolls of dust under the studio bed. I was surprised that they were there. Marylin's a pretty good housekeeper.

"I heard her get up and walk over to the cupboard and open a drawer. She rummaged around in it. I knew she was getting out a knife. And I knew the person who was watching was getting real interested, almost excited. He was getting a bang out of this.

"It was worse than it had been on the moon. Lots worse. Because this was in my and Marylin's little apartment, and it was Marylin who was going to kill me as soon as she found a knife she liked the looks of. It was all going to be bad, but the

moment I dreaded most would be when she stood over me wondering where to begin stabbing. I didn't think she'd do a good, quick job. And I wouldn't be able to do a thing to stop her as long as she was wearing the make-up mask.

"I was so scared I wondered my heart didn't stop beating. Looking up, I could see the edge of the table with the folded paper and the bottle of whiskey. It didn't mean anything for a minute. Then it gave me an idea.

"I raised up, trying to be quiet, and reached up for the bottle. She was clattering around in the drawer; I wondered which knife she'd pick. Then I lay down with the bottle in one hand. My fingers were so stiff I had trouble uncapping it.

"She came back. Her face was brighter than ever. She was holding one of the steak knives.

"When I looked at her, I didn't see how I could do it. She knelt down beside me, smiling with her dazzling blue-white mouth. I guess it was because I was so scared that I *could* do it. Anyhow, I raised my hand and threw the whiskey in her face.

"She gave a sort of whimper. I asked her afterwards, and she said it wasn't because the whiskey got in her eyes and stung. It was because wherever it hit her face it hurt and burned. Anyhow, her make-up began to drip and flow and run. It dripped down in big bright glittering drops on the front of her dress. She dropped the knife on the floor with a clatter. Her face puckered up. I could see her skin, pink, and irritated-looking, coming out from under the diamond-dust layer. She began to cry.

"I got up from the floor and put my arm around her. Now that her make-up was gone, I wasn't afraid of her, and she was crying. She was Marylin again. She'd tried to kill me, of course, but she hadn't really wanted to. I didn't hold it against her. I

felt awfully sorry for her. She hung on to me and bawled and bawled.

"She was trembling all over. For a long time she couldn't stop crying. She'd say, 'Milt— Oh, Milt—' and gulp and shudder and begin bawling again. Finally she let go my shoulders and went in the bathroom and washed her face. When she came back her eyes were red and swollen, but her face was clean, and she'd combed her hair.

"We sat down on the studio couch. She didn't seem to want to talk about what had happened. Once she said, 'When I put that stuff on my face, it changed me all around. Like a mirror in a circus sideshow.' And I said, 'Yeah. Don't think about it any more, kid.' We sat there for quite a long time with my arm around her. Then—"

"Just a minute," the desk sergeant interrupted. "Was the invisible watcher looking at you all this time?"

MILT shook his head. "I don't think so. I think he stopped looking at us just about the time Marilyn dropped the knife and began crying. He wasn't interested in us after that, you see. The story was over for him."

"Story?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about that later. Anyhow, we sat there on the couch for quite a long time. Then, without saying a word about it to each other, we got up at the same time and began working on the rowbow kit."

"Hunh?"

"I know it was a crazy thing to do. Marilyn and I both knew she'd tried to kill me, and had come within an inch of doing it. There was no reason to think the rowbow wouldn't be as bad as the moon scene and the make-up kit had been. But we didn't even discuss it. We just got out the screwdriver and started working on it."

"Neurotic compulsion."

"Yeah. Somebody was making us.

"It went together fast. It must have been about nine when we started, and it was quite a bit before ten when the rowbow was done. We stood there holding hands and looking at it. My fingers were on Marilyn's wrist, and I could feel that her heart was beating hard and fast.

"The rowbow was almost six feet tall. Neither Marilyn or I is very tall, and it towered up over us. It was thin, though, and cobwebby, like black lace. Its face was pretty sketchy—just eyes and a little mouth. It didn't have any nose or ears.

"For a minute or two nothing happened. Then the robot—rowbow—said, in a high, twangy voice, 'I am an invader from Mars.' It walked over to the side of the room, where there was a straight chair, and sat down in it.

"Marilyn giggled. It was a nervous giggle, I guess, and yet the invader had been funny. There was something about the stiff way it sat down that made you want to laugh.

"We waited. The invader just sat there, not even blinking. Finally Marilyn said, 'I guess that's all. It's done its little trick. I'm hungry, Milt. Let's have something to eat.'

"I looked at the clock. It was after ten, and I felt as hollow as a drum inside. So I said—"

"Wait a minute," the sergeant broke in. "I got a couple of questions. Do you think it was an invader from Mars? And did you feel at this time that somebody was watching you?"

"Naw, it wasn't a real invader. That was just the name of the kit. About somebody watching me, that was about ten minutes later—"

"Like I was saying it was late, and we'd been through a lot. I said, 'I'm hungry too, kiddo. How about some fried egg sandwiches?' I and she both like fried eggs.

"She went to the cupboard and got eggs and bread and butter. While



the eggs were frying, she broke off a little piece of bread and buttered it and ate it. She was bending over getting out some lettuce while she chewed. And I thought—I've never thought anything like this before, in all the time I've known her—I thought, 'If she keeps on eating all the time like that, she's going to be as fat as a hog in a couple of years.'

"Do you get what I mean?" Delisle looked at the sergeant earnestly. "It wasn't like me to have an idea like that."

"That's nothing. Lots of married men think the same thing."

"Yeah, but she's not fat. Just a little plump. On her, it's cute."

"It was just about then that I got the idea that somebody was watching me."

"I went on thinking while the eggs were frying. I thought, 'She's getting too fat. And she's bossy. What ailed me to marry a woman like that? In a couple of years I won't be able to call my soul my own. There must be some way of getting rid of her.' I looked over at the window. It was open. And it seemed to me it would be duck soup to call her over, pretending there was something I wanted to show her, and push her out."

"And did you?" the sergeant asked. "Try to push her out, I mean."

**N**O, of course not. But I was scared. I looked at the row-bow. It wasn't doing anything, just sitting. But I was sure it was responsible for my thinking those thoughts. I could feel a—a sort of force, like a broadcast, coming toward me out of its head. And I had that nasty feeling of being watched.

"Now, I don't suppose I ought to have done it." Milton licked his lips. "Run out on her like that, I mean. I'll bet she was worried all night. But I knew she'd tried to kill me. And I knew that if the invader really put the heat on me, I wouldn't have a chance. I'd try to kill her."

"I couldn't think for a minute. I was so mad at myself for having helped make the invader that I wanted to go beat my head against the wall."

"I remembered there was a bunch of wires on the back of the thing, and I thought if I could get hold of those wires and rip them loose the invader wouldn't be able to broadcast any more. It was a good idea, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't move a finger in the direction of the chair where the thing was sitting. It was like being paralyzed. I stood there sweating and trying to move, and I couldn't. They wouldn't let me end the story that way."

"Just a minute," the sergeant said. "That's the second time you've said something about a story. And before that you spoke about having an idea about the toys in the toy shop. Do you have some general theory about all this?"

"Well, yes." Milton Delisle shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and sighed. His arches were hurting him. "The things in the shop—they were pretty and bright colored and so on, but they weren't really nice. Do you know what I mean? The dolls had nice shiny dresses, but they had hateful expressions. The stuffed animals were nice and big, but they looked hard and lumpy. I don't know that they would have, but they looked like if a kid tried to play with them they'd give him an electric shock. The things in the shop, unh, looked like they were made by people who couldn't stop being mean and hateful even when they wanted to be nice and give a present. The shop was all like that."

"The toys were made by sadistic people. Um. You got any more ideas?"

"Well, I think the shop was from some other time, maybe the future, when everybody's going to be hateful and mean. And I think its being there on Saturday night was a sort of a trap."

"How? For whom?"

"For me and Marilyn. I don't mean for us specially—I mean for anybody who came in the shop. I think that shop sometimes leaves its own time and comes into ours, to trap people. So there'll be a story for the people of that time to watch."

The sergeant looked baffled. "I don't get it," he said. "You've said a lot of funny things already, but they sort of hung together until now."

"Well, this hangs together too," Milt said with a flash of spirit. "What is a story, anyhow? It's getting the hero in a hole and then watching to see how he gets out, or maybe doesn't get out. I think the clerk in the store saw me pilking those kits and let me have them anyhow, because he knew they'd get me and Marilyn in a jam. That's what the people we couldn't see were watching—how we'd act and what we'd do when we were in a bad jam."

"In a story, though, you want the hero to win, and these people didn't. They were just interested in seeing how we'd act when we were in trouble, threatened and scared."

"Sadistic interest," observed the sergeant. "Well, go on."

"Where was I? Oh, I was trying to get near the invader to rip the wires loose, and I couldn't."

"I stood there trying to think. I could smell the eggs frying, and they smelled good. I was hungry. But I didn't dare stay there for fear I'd do something to Marilyn. So I just walked out."

"Without saying anything to your wife?"

"Oh, I called something like, 'Good-bye, kid, I'll be back.' I didn't have time to say much. She looked awfully surprised."

"You see, my idea was this. The invader was interested in me, not in Marilyn. If I walked out, it would probably come after me. She wouldn't be bothered. And I might be able to

think of a way of getting rid of it."

"And did it? Come after you, I mean."

**Y**EAH. When I was about half-way down the second flight of stairs I heard it coming. It sort of rustles when it walks. I was almost running when I got to the foot of the stairs.

"It followed me all night, suggesting things. It doesn't want anybody to see it—whenever I got near people, it would hide. I didn't dare to go to a hotel, though, for fear it would come up in the elevator after me, or maybe climb up the side of the wall. I didn't think I could stand seeing its little black head coming up over the window sill. Or maybe it would get in the room with me, between me and the door. I'd have walked as long as my feet would hold up rather than be shut in a room with it."

"Claustrophobia," said the desk sergeant.

"I guess. Anyhow, I walked around all night. I went to the park, and down to the waterfront, and once I hired a taxi and had the man drive out beyond Twin Peaks. It didn't do any good—when I got out and paid him, there it was. It must have hung on to the car."

"It kept suggesting things. As it got later at night, the things got worse. I never had such ideas before in my life. It may not sound it, but having those ideas in my head was worse than having Marilyn try to kill me, or being down on the moon with a man who was shooting at me. It was worse because it was in my *mind*."

"What were the things it suggested?"

"They were terrible."

"Yeah, but can't you give me an example?"

"When I passed a drinking fountain it suggested—listen, I'm not going to tell you. I got a right to some privacy. Just take it from me, they were terrible."



"Repressed scatological desires rising into consciousness," the sergeant said, as one who makes a long overdue diagnosis.

"I wish you'd stop talking like that," Milt answered irritably. "Why don't you talk English? I can't tell what you're driving at."

"Never mind. What happened after that?"

"Pretty soon it began to get light. I never was so glad to see anything in my life as I was to see the sun coming up. I was hungry and dead tired and I'd spent almost all my money on the taxi. I thought maybe when it was light the invader would stop following me. It didn't, but it stayed farther away from me, for fear people would see it, and its broadcasts weren't so bad. I sat down on a bench and rested, and I bought myself a hamburger.

"The trouble was, I didn't have any idea how to get rid of it. Then about ten o'clock I thought, maybe if I could go to jail—you see, there're always people hanging around a police station. It wouldn't follow me inside. And I'm hoping that after I've been in jail a few days it'll get tired of waiting for me and go away."

Delisle halted. He mopped his face with his handkerchief and gave a deep sigh.

"Go on," said the sergeant after a minute.

"That's all. There isn't anything more."

"Oh. Is the what you call it—invader—following you now?"

"It's outside, hiding behind a garbage can."

"Do you have that feeling of being watched at present?"

"Not since I came in the station."

"Pretty obvious," the sergeant commented. "Now that you're under the eye of a real representative of parental authority, the haunting, floating feeling of being watched has left you. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Put me in jail. Like I said, I pilked the toys."

The sergeant deliberated, chewing his fleshy lower lip. He looked Delisle over slowly, frowning, while Milt, grown nervous, once more mopped at his face.

"I won't do it," the sergeant said abruptly.

"Hunh?"

"No, I won't. Lunar molds, diamond masks, Martian invaders! Why, I never heard of such rubbish in my life! Here." The sergeant drew a glass inkwell toward him, dipped a pen, and began to write. When he had done, he extended the note toward Milt.

"I've written a note to Dr. Zimberg, at city clinic," he explained to Delisle. "He's a very sound man, good Freudian, none of this Adler stuff. I want you to take the note to him and let him look you over. For my book you need a thorough analysis, before something worse happens, but of course Dr. Zimberg will have to be the judge. Don't be ashamed to tell him *anything*. Here." He shook the note at Milt. "Come back in a couple of months and tell me how you're getting along."

At the sergeant's first refusal Milt had turned pale. He had listened with sagging hopes while he had spoken of Dr. Zimberg. But when he heard that he wasn't supposed to come back to the station for two months—two months of having the invader following him, rustling, *s u g g e s t i n g—two whole months—he* felt a shuddering panic. For a moment he stood gasping. Then his brain gave a decisive click. He picked up the inkwell and hurled it straight in the sergeant's face. . . .

THE sergeant went off duty at five. Much scrubbing and Boraxo had got the ink stains off his face and neck, but his gray shirt front and the breast of his uniform still bore big blue-black spots.

There was a large lump over his right eye where the inkwell had struck him. His head ached.

He walked downhill toward his streetcar, thinking. Now that Delisle was behind the bars, charged with assault, he felt a certain compunction. Of course the little punk—a pathological masochist, if the sergeant ever saw one—had dared him to do it, and a lot of officers wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation to sock him one, or at least give him a kick.

His car came. He swung aboard it and sat down in the back. It had been a bad day, but in police work you got bad days. And when he got home, Leona would have supper waiting for him. She was a good cook.

She was putting on weight, of course. Women always seemed to, after they were married. It wasn't becoming to her. But she still wasn't bad looking.

His corner drew near. He pressed the button and got off the car. He had three blocks to walk, and then he'd be home.

It was too bad Leona was such a poor housekeeper. There were always rings in the bathtub, lint and hair on the carpet, dirty dishes in the sink. Nothing was ever put away or cared for properly. And it was just laziness, since they hadn't any kids.

She was lazy about her personal appearance, too. Her nose hadn't known the touch of powder for the

last two years, her hair was dusty with dandruff, greasy and lank. What did she do all day while he was gone, lay on the couch and eat candy? And her temper was bad. She was always nagging. She was a shrew, a slut.

Her temper, her laziness, her dirt moved in his brain kaleidoscopically. He felt his mind contract in a paroxysm of disgusted hate. He loathed her, she sickened him. What in God's name had made him tie himself to a woman like that? And how in God's name could he get rid of her? There must be some way. He had a sudden, sharp, bright, voluptuous picture of his fingers fastening around her greasy throat.

He could, he would do it. That way or another. He— There was a rustle behind him. Startled, he turned.

Between him and the twilight skyline there stood a tall, fantastically slender shape of black steel lace.

Oh, no. Surely not. He wouldn't believe it. Delisle had been lying. Or were delusions catching? He looked around him wildly, hoping for relief, for escape. As a flood of hateful ideas poured in upon him, he clutched at his collar and licked his lips.

No, no, no. It mustn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't be the next installment of the story.

It wasn't true. No.

From the vacancy above his head there came a high, pleased laugh.

## THE NAMING OF NAMES

(Continued from page 29)

The captain looked at the room, the dusty windows, the blue mountains, the canals, and he heard the soft wind in the air. He shivered. Then, recovering, he tapped a large new map.

"A lot to be done, Lieutenant." His voice droned on as the sun sank among the blue hills. "The old records were lost. We've a job of remapping to do, renaming the mountains, and

such. Now, what do you think of calling these mountains the Lincoln Mountains, this canal the Washington Canal, those hills the Harding Hills, this sea the Rockefeller Sea, and we'll make this the Einstein Valley, and over here— Are you listening, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant snapped his gaze from the distant hills.

"What? Oh, yes, sir!"





# NOISE

BY JACK VANCE

*When the noise got him, they thought him insane — so little did they know*

1

CAPTAIN HESS placed a notebook on the desk, and hauled a chair up under his sturdy buttocks. Pointing to the notebook, he said, "That's the property of your man Evans. He left it aboard the ship."

Galispell said in faint surprise, "There was nothing else? No letter? We haven't heard a word from him."

"No, sir, not a thing. That note-

book was all he had when we picked him up."

Galispell rubbed his fingers along the scarred fibers of the covers. "It's understandable, I suppose, when you consider what he's been through." He flipped back the cover. "Hmmm."

Hess said tentatively, "I suppose—you've always thought of Evans as, well, rather a strange chap?"

"Howard Evans? No, not at all. He's been a very valuable man to us."

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He considered Captain Hess reflectively. "Exactly how do you mean 'strange'?"

Hess frowned, searching for the precise picture of Evans' behavior. "I guess you might say erratic, or maybe emotional."

Galispell was genuinely startled. "Howard Evans?"

Hess' eyes went to the notebook. "I took the liberty of looking through his log, and—well—"

"And you got the impression he was—strange."

Hess flushed stubbornly. "Maybe everything he writes is true. But I've been poking into odd corners of space all my life, and I've never seen anything like it."

"Peculiar situation," said Galispell in a neutral voice. He looked thoughtfully at the notebook.

## II

### Journal of Howard Charles Evans

**I** COMMENCE this journal without pessimism but certainly without optimism. I feel as if I have already died once. My time in the lifeboat was at least a foretaste of death. I flew on and on through the dark, and a coffin could be only slightly more cramped. The stars were above, below, ahead, astern. I have no clock, and I can put no duration to my drifting. It was more than a week, it was less than a year.

So much for space, the lifeboat, the stars. There are not too many pages in this journal. I will need them all to chronicle my life on this world which, rising up under me, gave me life.

There is much to tell and many ways in the telling. There is myself, my own response to this rather dramatic situation. But lacking the knack for tracing the contours and contortions of my psyche, I will try to detail events as objectively as possible.

I landed the lifeboat on as favorable a spot as I had opportunity to

select. I tested the atmosphere, temperature, pressure and biology; then I ventured outside. I rigged an antenna and despatched my first SOS.

Shelter is no problem; the lifeboat serves me as a bed and, if necessary, a refuge. From sheer boredom later on I may fell a few of these trees and build a house. But I will wait; there is no urgency.

A stream of pure water trickles past the lifeboat; I have abundant concentrated food. As soon as the hydroponic tanks begin to produce, there will be fresh fruits and vegetables and yeast proteins—

Survival seems no particular problem.

The sun is a ball of dark crimson, and casts hardly more light than the full moon of Earth. The lifeboat rests on a meadow of thick black-green creeper, very pleasant underfoot. A hundred yards distant in the direction I shall call south lies a lake of inky water, and the meadow slopes smoothly down to the water's edge. Tall sprays of rather pallid vegetation—I had best use the word 'trees'—bound the meadow on either side.

Behind is a hillside, which possibly continues into a range of mountains; I can't be sure. This dim red light makes vision uncertain after the first few hundred feet.

The total effect is one of haunted desolation and peace. I would enjoy the beauty of the situation if it were not for the uncertainties of the future.

The breeze drifts across the lake, smelling pleasantly fragrant, and it carries a whisper of sound from off the waves.

**I** HAVE assembled the hydroponic tanks, and set out cultures of yeast. I shall never starve nor die of thirst. The lake is smooth and inviting; perhaps in time I will build a little boat. The water is warm, but I dare not swim. What could be more terrible than to be seized from below and dragged under?



There is probably no basis for my misgivings. I have seen no animal life of any kind: no birds, fish, insects, crustacea. The world is one of absolute quiet, except for the whispering breeze.

The scarlet sun hangs in the sky, remaining in place during many of my sleeps. I see it is slowly westering; after this long day how long and how monotonous will be the night!

I have sent off four SOS sequences; somewhere a monitor station must catch them.

A machete is my only weapon, and I have been reluctant to venture far from the lifeboat. Today (if I may use the word) I took my courage in my hands and started around the lake. The trees are rather like birches, tall and supple. I think the bark and leaves would shine a clear silver in light other than this wine-colored gloom. Along the lake-shore they stand in a line, almost as if long ago they had been planted by a wandering gardener. The tall branches sway in the breeze, glinting scarlet with purple overtones, a strange and wonderful picture which I am alone to see.

I have heard it said that enjoyment of beauty is magnified in the presence of others: that a mysterious rapport comes into play to reveal subtleties which a single mind is unable to grasp. Certainly as I walked along the avenue of trees with the lake and the scarlet sun behind, I would have been grateful for companionship—but I believe that something of peace, the sense of walking in an ancient abandoned garden, would be lost.

The lake is shaped like an hourglass; at the narrow waist I could look across and see the squat shape of the lifeboat. I sat down under a bush, which continually nodded red and black flowers in front of me.

Mist fibrils drifted across the lake and the wind made low musical sounds.

I rose to my feet and continued around the lake.

I passed through forests and glades and came once more to my lifeboat.

I went to tend my hydroponic tanks, and I think the yeast had been disturbed, prodded at curiously.

THE dark red sun is sinking. Every day—it must be clear that I use 'day' as the interval between my sleeps—finds it lower in the sky. Night is almost upon me, long night. How shall I spend my time in the dark?

I have no gauge other than my mind, but the breeze seems colder. It brings long mournful chords to my ears, very sad, very sweet. Mist-wraiths go bleeting across the meadow.

Wan stars already show themselves, nameless ghost-lamps without significance.

I have been considering the slope behind my meadow; tomorrow I think I will make the ascent.

I have plotted the position of every article I possess. I will be gone some hours, and—if a visitor meddles with my goods, I will know his presence for certain.

The sun is low, the air pinches at my cheeks. I must hurry if I wish to return while light still shows me the landscape. I picture myself lost; I see myself wandering the face of this world, groping for my precious lifeboat, my tanks, my meadow.

**A** NXIETY, curiosity, obstinacy all spurring me, I set off up the slope at a half-trot.

Becoming winded almost at once, I slowed my pace. The turf of the lake shore had disappeared; I was walking on bare rock and lichen. Below me the meadow became a patch, my lifeboat a gleaming spindle. I watched for a moment. Nothing stirred anywhere in my range of vision.

I continued up the slope and finally breasted the ridge. A vast rolling valley fell off below me. Across, rose a range of great mountains, rearing

above me into the dark sky. The wine-colored light slanting in from the west lit the prominences, the frontal sallies and bluffs, left the valleys in gloom, an alternate sequence of red and black beginning far in the west, continuing past, far to the east.

I looked down behind me, down to my own meadow, and was hard put to find it in the fading light. Ah, there it was! And there, the lake, a sprawling hourglass. Beyond was dark forest, then a strip of old rose savannah, then a dark strip of woodland, then delicate laminae of colorings to the horizon.

The sun touched the edge of the mountains, and with what seemed almost a sudden lurch, fell half below the horizon. I turned down-slope; a terrible thing to be lost in the dark. My eye fell upon a white object, a hundred yards along the ridge. I stared, and walked nearer. Gradually it assumed form: a thimble, a cone, a pyramid—a cairn of white rocks. I walked forward with feet achingly heavy.

A cairn, certainly. I stood looking down on it.

I turned, looked swiftly over my shoulder. Nothing in view. I looked down to the meadow. Swift shapes? I strained through the gathering murk. Nothing.

I tore at the cairn, threw rocks aside. What was below?

Nothing.

In the ground a faintly-marked rectangle three feet long was perceptible. I stood back. No power I knew of could induce me to dig into that soil.

The sun was disappearing. Already at the south and north the afterglow began, lees of wine: the sun moved with astounding rapidity; what manner of sun was this, dawdling at the meridian, plunging below the horizon?

I turned down-slope, but darkness came faster. The scarlet sun was gone; in the west was the sad sketch of departed flame. I stumbled, I fell. I looked into the east. A marvellous

zodiacal light was forming, a strengthening blue triangle.

I watched, from my hands and knees. A cusp of bright blue lifted into the sky. A moment later a flood of sapphire washed landscape. A new sun of intense indigo rose into the sky.

The world was the same and yet different; where my eyes had been accustomed to red, and the multitudinous red sub-colors, now I saw the intricate cycle of blue.

When I returned to my meadow, the breeze carried a new sound: bright allegro chords that my mind could almost form into melody. For a moment I so amused myself, and thought to see dance-motion in the wisps of vapor which for the last few days had been noticeable over my meadow.

In what I will call a peculiar frame of mind, I crawled into the lifeboat and went to sleep.

**I** CRAWLED blinking out of the lifeboat into an electric world. I listened. Surely that was music—faint whispers drifting in on the wind like a fragrance.

I went down to the lake, as blue as a ball of that cobalt dye so aptly known as bluing.

The music came louder; I could catch snatches of melody—sprightly quick-step phrases carried on a flowing legato like colored tinsel on a flow of cream.

I put my hands to my ears; if I were experiencing auditory hallucinations, the music would continue. The sound—if it were music—diminished, but did not fade entirely; my test was not definitive. But I felt sure it was real. And where music was there must be musicians. . . . I ran forward, shouted, "Hello!"

"Hello!" came the echo from across the lake.

The music faded a moment, as a cricket chorus quiets when disturbed, then gradually I could hear it again



—distant music, 'horns of elf-land faintly blowing'.

It went completely out of perception. I was left standing haggard in the blue light, alone on my meadow.

I washed my face, returned to the lifeboat, sent out another set of SOS signals.

POSSIBLY the blue day is shorter than the red day; with no clock I can't be sure. But with my new fascination, the music and its source, the blue day seems to pass swifter.

Never have I caught sight of the musicians. Is the sound generated by the trees, by diaphanous insects crouching out of my vision?

One day I glanced across the lake, and wonder of wonders! a gay town spread along the opposite shore. After a first dumbfounded gaze, I ran down to the water's edge, stared as if it were the most precious sight of my life.

Pale silk swayed and rippled: pavilions, tents, fantastic edifices.... Who inhabited these places? I waded knee-deep into the lake, the breath catching and creaking in my throat, and thought to see flitting shapes.

I ran like a madman around the shore. Plants with pale blue blossoms succumbed to my feet; I left the trail of an elephant through a patch of delicate reeds.

And when I came panting and exhausted to the shore opposite my meadow, what was there? Nothing.

The city had vanished like a dream, like spectres blown on a wind. I sat down on a rock. Music came clear for an instant, as if a door had momentarily opened.

I jumped to my feet. Nothing to be seen. I looked back across the lake. There—on my meadow—a host of gauzy shapes moved like May-flies over a still pond.

When I returned, my meadow was vacant. The shore across the lake was bare.

SO GOES the blue day; and now there is fascination to my life. Whence comes the music? Who and what are these flitting shapes, never quite real but never entirely out of mind? Four times an hour I press a hand to my forehead, fearing the symptoms of a mind turning in on itself.... If music actually exists on this world, actually vibrates the air, why should it come to my ears as Earth music? These chords I hear might be struck on familiar instruments; the progressions and harmonies are not at all alien.... And these pale plasmic wisps that I forever seem to catch from the corner of my eye: the semblance and style is that of gay and playful humanity. The tempo of their movement is the tempo of the music: tarantella, sarabande, farandole....

So goes the blue day. Blue air, blue-black turf, ultramarine water, and the bright blue star bent to the west.... How long have I lived on this planet? I have broadcast the SOS sequence until now the batteries hiss with exhaustion; soon there will be an end to power. Food, water are no problem to me, but what use is a lifetime of exile on a world of blue and red?

THE blue day is at its close. I would like to mount the slope and watch the glory of the blue suns' passing—but the remembrance of the red sunset still provokes a queasiness in my stomach. So I will watch from my meadow, and then, if there is darkness, I will crawl into the lifeboat like a bear into a cave, and await the coming of light.

The blue day goes. The sapphire sun wanders into the western forest, the sky glooms to blue-black, the stars show like unfamiliar home-places.

For some time now I have heard no music; perhaps it has been so all-present that I neglect it.

The blue star is gone, the air chills, I think that deep night is on

me indeed... I hear a throb of sound, plangent, plaintive; I turn my head. The east glows pale pearl. A silver globe floats up into the night like a lotus drifting on a lake: a great ball like six of Earth's full moons. Is this a sun, a satellite, a burnt-out star? What a freak of cosmolog I have chanced upon!

The silver sun—I must call it a sun, although it casts a cool satin light—moves in an aureole like oyster-shell. Once again the color of the planet changes. The lake glistens like quick-silver, the trees are hammered metal... The silver star passes over a high wrack of clouds, and the music seems to burst forth as if somewhere someone flung wide curtains: the music of moonlight, medieval marble, piazzas with slim fluted colonnades, soft sighing strains that Claude Debussy might have conceived.

I wander down to the lake. Across on the opposite shore once more I see the town. It seems clearer, more substantial; I note details that shimmered away to vagueness before—a wide terrace beside the lake, spiral pilasters, a row of decorative urns. The silhouette is, I think, the same as when I saw it under the blue sun: great silken tents, shimmering, reflecting cusps of light; pillars of carved stone, lucent as milk-glass; fantastic fixtures of no obvious purpose... Barges drift along the dark quicksilver lake like moths, great sails bellying idly, the rigging a mesh of cobweb. Nodules of light, like fairy lanterns, hang on the stays, along the masts... On sudden thought, I turn, look up to my own meadow. I see a row of booths as at an old-time fair, a circle of pale stone set in the turf, a host of filmy shapes.

Step by step I edge toward my lifeboat. The music waxes, chords and structures of wonderful sweetness. I peer at one of the shapes, but the outlines waver. It moves to the emotion of the music—or does the motion of the shape generate the music?

I run forward, shouting hoarsely. One of the shapes slips past me, and I look into a blur where a face might be. I come to a halt, panting hard; I stand on the marble circle. I stamp; it rings solid. I walk toward the booths, they seem to display complex things of pale cloth and dimmet-al—but as I look my eyes mist over as with tears. The music goes far far away, my meadow lies bare and quiet. My feet press into silver-black turf; in the sky hangs the silver-black star.

I AM sitting with my back to the lifeboat, staring across the lake, which is still as a mirror. I have arrived at a set of theories.

My primary proposition is that I am sane—a necessary article of faith; why bother even to speculate otherwise? So—events occurring outside my own mind cause everything I have seen and heard. But—note this!—these sights and sounds do not obey the laws of classical science; in many respects they seem particularly subjective.

It must be, I tell myself, that both objectivity and subjectivity enter into the situation. I receive impressions which my brain finds unfamiliar, and so translates to the concept most closely related. By this theory the inhabitants of this world are constantly close; I move unknowingly through their palaces and arcades; they dance incessantly around me. As my mind gains sensitivity. I verge upon rapport with their way of life and I see them. More exactly, I sense something which creates an image in the visual region of my brain. Their emotions, the pattern of their life sets up a kind of vibration which sounds in my brain as music... The reality of these creatures I am sure I will never know. They are diaphane, I am flesh; they live in a world of spirit, I plod the turf with my heavy feet.

THESE last days I have neglected



to broadcast the SOS. Small lack; the batteries are about done.

The silver sun is at the zenith, and leans westward. What comes next? Back to the red sun? Or darkness? Certainly this is no ordinary planetary system; the course of this world along its orbit must resemble one of the pre-Copernican epicycles.

I believe that my brain is gradually tuning into phase with this world, reaching a new high level of sensitivity. If my theory is correct, the *élan-vital* of the native beings expresses itself in my brain as music. On Earth we would perhaps use the word telepathy... So I am practicing, concentrating, opening my consciousness wide to these new perceptions. Ocean mariners know a trick of never looking directly at a far light lest it strike the eyes' blind spot. I am using a similar device of never staring directly at one of the gauzy beings. I allow the image to establish itself, build itself up, and by this technique they appear quite definitely human. I sometimes think I can glimpse the features. The women are like sylphs, achingly beautiful; the men—I have not seen one in detail, but their carriage, their form is hauntingly familiar.

The music is always part of the background, just as rustling of leaves is part of a forest. The mood of these creatures seems to change with their sun, so I hear interpretive music to suit. The red sun gave them passionate melancholy, the blue sun merriment. Under the silver star they are delicate, imaginative, wistful, and in my mind sounds Debussy's *La Mer* and *Les Sirènes*.

THE silver day is on the wane. Today I sat beside the lake with the trees before me like a screen of silver filigree, watching the moth-barges drift back and forth. What is their function, I wonder? Can life such as this be translated in terms of economies, ecology, sociology? I doubt it,

The word intelligence may not even enter the picture; is not our brain a peculiarly anthropoid characteristic, and is not intelligence a function of our peculiarly anthropoid brain?... A portly barge sways near, with swamp-globes of orange and blue in the rigging, and I forget my hypotheses. I can never know the truth, and it is perfectly possible that these creatures are no more aware of me than I originally was aware of them.

Time goes by; I return to the lifeboat. A young woman-shape whirls past. I pause, peer into her face; she tilts her head, her eyes burn into mine as she passes, mocking topaz, not unkindly... I try an SOS—listlessly, because I suspect the batteries to be dank and dead.

And indeed they are.

THE silver star is like an enormous Christmas tree bauble, round and glistening. It floats low, and once more I stand irresolute, half-expecting night.

The star falls; the forest receives it. The sky dulls, and night has come.

I face the east, my back pressed to the pragmatic hull of my lifeboat. Nothing.

I have no conception of the passage of time. Darkness, timelessness. Somewhere clocks turn minute hands, second hands, hour hands—I stand staring into the night, perhaps as slow as a sandstone statue, perhaps as feverish as a salamander.

In the darkness there is a peculiar cessation of sound. The music has dwindled, down through a series of wistful chords, a forlorn last cry...

A glow in the east, a green glow, spreading. Up rises a magnificent green sphere, the essence of all green, the tincture of emeralds, glowing as grass, fresh as mint, deep as the sea.

A throb of sound, music: rhythmic strong music, swinging and veering.

The green light floods the planet, and I prepare for the green day.

I am almost one with the native things. I wander among their pavilions, I pause by their booths to ponder their stuffs and wares: silken medallions, spangles and circlets of woven metal, cups of fluff and iridescent puff, puddles of color and wafts of light-shot gauze. There are chains of green glass, each link shaped like a horse-shoe; captive butterflies; spheres which seem to hold all the heavens, all the clouds, all the stars.

And to all sides of me goes the flicker and flit of the dream-people. The men are all vague, but familiar; the women turn me smiles of ineffable provocation. But I will drive myself mad with temptations; what I see is no more than the formulation of my own brain, an interpretation... And this is tragedy, for there is one creature so unutterably lovely that whenever I see the shape that is she, my throat aches and I run forward, to peer into her eyes that are not eyes...

Today I clasped my arms around her, expecting yielding wisp. Surprisingly there was the feel of supple flesh. I kissed her, cheek, chin, mouth. Such a look of perplexity on the sweet face as I have never seen; Heaven knows what strange act the creature thought me to be performing.

She went her way, but the music is strong and triumphant: the voice of cornets, the shoulder of resonant bass below.

A man comes past; something in his stride, his posture, plucks at my memory. I resolutely step forward; I will gaze into his face. I will plumb the vagueness.

He whirls past like a figure on a carousel; he wears flapping ribbons of silk and pompoms of spangled satin. I pound after him, I plant myself in his path. He strides past with a side-glance, and I stare into the rigid mask-like face.

It is my own face.

He wears my face, he walks with my stride. He is me.

Already is the green day gone?

THE green sun goes, and the music takes on depth. No cessation now; there is preparation, imminence... What is that other sound? A far spasm of something growling and clashing like a broken gear-box.

It fades out.

The green sun goes down in a sky like a peacock's tail. The music is slow, exalted.

The west fades, the east glows. The music goes toward the east, to the great bands of rose, yellow, orange, lavender. Cloud-flecks burst into flame. A golden glow consumes the sky, north and south.

The music takes on volume, a liturgical chanting.

Up rises the new sun—a gorgeous golden ball. The music swells into a paean of light, fulfillment, regeneration... Hark! a second time the harsh sound grates across the music.

Into the sky, across the sun, drifts the shape of a spaceship. It hovers over my meadow, the landing jets come down like plumes.

The ship lands.

I hear the mutter of voices—men's voices.

The music is vanished; the marble carvings, the tinsel booths, the wonderful silken cities are gone.

### III

**G**ALISPELL looked up, rubbed his chin.

Captain Hess asked anxiously, "What do you think of it?"

For a moment Galispell made no reply; then he said. "It's a strange document..." He looked for a long moment out the window. "What happened after you picked him up? Did you see any of these phenomena he talks about?"

"Not a thing," Captain Hess solemnly shook his big round head. "Sure, the system was a fantastic gaggle of dark stars and fluorescent planets and burnt-out old suns; maybe all these



things played hob with his mind. He didn't seem too overjoyed to see us, that's a fact—just stood there, staring at us as if we were trespassers. 'We got your SOS,' I told him. 'Jump aboard, wrap yourself around a good meal!' He came walking forward as if his feet were dead.

"Well, to make a long story short, he finally came aboard. We loaded on his lifeboat and took off.

"During the voyage back, he had nothing to do with anybody—just kept to himself, walking up and down the promenade.

"He had a habit of putting his hands to his head; one time I asked him if he was sick, if he wanted the medic to look him over. He said no, there was nothing wrong with him. That's about all I know of the man.

"We made Sun, and came down toward Earth. Personally, I didn't see what happened, because I was on the bridge, but this is what they tell me:

"As Earth got bigger and bigger Evans began to act more restless than usual, wincing and turning his head back and forth. When we were about a thousand miles out, he gave a kind of furious jump.

"The noise!" he yelled. 'The horrible noise!' And with that he ran astern, jumped into his lifeboat, cast off, and they tell me disappeared back the way we came.

"And that's all I got to tell you, Mr. Galispell. It's too bad, after our taking all that trouble to get him, Evans decided to pull up stakes—but that's the way it goes."

"He took off back along your course?"

"That's right. If you're wanting to ask, could he have made the planet where we found him, the answer is, not likely."

"But there's a chance?" persisted Galispell.

"Oh, sure," said Captain Hess. "There's a chance."

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## MESSENGER

(Continued from page 50)

with me," said Bentow.

"You will," snapped Jackson. "Mr. Ford told us what you said about killing him with his own inventions. Watch what happens to you when you run into the lie detector in court. He invented *that*, too!"

The door from the general offices opened. The guard-captain stood flat-footed and looked at every face in the room in one swift sweep. Then he pointed his finger at Bentow.

"His," he said tersely.

"I asked the captain to get the thumb-print from that push-button outside Station Number Forty-eight," Jackson explained, and match it if he could in the company files. It's yours, all right."

Bentow opened his mouth, put his hands to his face, and slumped down in a near faint.

"I think," said Ford harshly, "that my haywire kid Dorcas is going to get that jolt I was talking about." Then, oddly, he began to laugh. He laughed until Hinks nudged him anxiously.

"I'm all right," whispered Ford. "Maybe I'm delirious. I was just thinking about getting that message through to you fellows. Did you know I'm leaving everything I have to Providence?"

There was a bumble of approving excitement in the room.

"Providence," said Ford, "has had a lot of names at one time or another—a lot of 'em. D'you remember what the name of Jupiter's messenger was, Jackson?"

Jackson frowned.

"Uh—Hermes?"

"No, son. It was Mercury!"

Ford shook his head and laughed again.



# A CONDITION OF BEAUTY

BY JOHN D. MacDONALD

*Among the mutants on Arcturus, Pol and Lae see themselves as others see them*

THEY threw the meat to him and he fed in darkness, his eyes smarted from the after effect of the blinding light which had, for a few moments, shone through the small door.

Food was good and hunger was good. His ears heard the tearing of the flesh from the dry bone and there was a good stinging at the corners of his jaws.

The old one crouched in the cor-

ner of the cell and ate with less noise.

He who was known as Pol threw the cleaned bone aside toward the heap of other bones. He padded with bare feet across the dirt floor and drank deeply of the single stream of water that came from the wall and fell into a deep pit at his feet.

The old one, his voice muffled with food, said, "I heard them speak, Pol. This is the year of great light, when

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the two suns are close. Tomorrow is the ceremony."

"I saw one such," Pol said. "My mother hid me and at last she sent me alone into the forest. I lived in the forest. For many months the sky was bright. And on the brightest morning of all, I heard the singing. By then I could move in the forest as quietly as any animal. I crept through the brush and I saw them. The priests and the naked giggling maidens of the village and those with drums. They went to the silver temple."

The old one sighed. "I never saw the temple."

Pol thumped his naked chest with a strong fist.

"I saw it and, after many days when I was certain that no one was about, I entered the temple."

The old one gasped in awe.

"I entered the temple and I walked on the silver floors and saw the great wheels and the metal which can be looked through and all the rest of it. And I saw pictures of monsters even like you and I, Old One."

The old one cackled. "At last you come to know yourself as a monster."

Pol was suddenly dejected. He sat on the floor, his back against the stone. In a lifeless voice he said, "In darkness it is hard to accept. I feel like a man. I think as a man does. It is odd to be monstrous. It is something one wishes to forget."

Suddenly he remembered the girl. He padded to the far corner of the cell, pulled away the rock which no two of the normal ones could have lifted.

He set it on the dirt floor, hissed at the opening.

Her voice startled him, it was so close. "It is you, Pol," she said softly.

"Who else can lift that stone, Lae? I hear your voice and in my mind I see you as a woman, a normal woman. A woman such as my mother. The old man and I have talked

of how horrible it is to be a monster which must be hidden in darkness. It is easy to forget that you are one such, in this eternal darkness."

Her fingers brushed his arm. "Touch my arm," she said.

He did so, felt the horror within him as his fingers told him that her arm was strong, solid, thick.

"There," Lae said. "It is best that you never forget that I am as you."

**H**E DID not answer for many moments.

He said, "Today you refused food again?"

"I did," she said. "I grow weak."

"Try to come through the space in the stones. I will help you."

In a few minutes he was forced to give up as she moaned with pain, her flesh torn by the bitter edges of the rock.

"What will be gained?" she asked.

There was no humor in his low laugh. "Here in the darkness I pretend I am a man as other men. And I pretend that you are as other women. I want you with me. I want you where I can touch you."

The old one laughed. It was a high, wild laugh—fading into something midway between a sob and a moan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Patrol Eleven, of Planet Census Group Fifty-One, reached the projected frame of reference and each succeeding pulsation of the drive dropped velocity below supra-light to the extent that the pilot screen began to show the blazing form of Arcturus with one hundred times the luminosity of Sol.

The pulsation stopped and the screen came completely alive, adjusted for the fifty percent distortion caused by the speed of .75L.

Captain Harvey Crane, a thin tired man with weak eyes, grinned at Dan Brian, the first officer, pulled the

mike to his lips and announced to the rest of the crew:

"Here we are. Homeward bound. This is area Alice Baker Day cught one eight. Only two more areas to go. Chief Photographers Mate, report to the bridge. Arrange sectors with Mr. Brian."

Captain Crane stood up, yawned and said, "Take it, Dan. You'll find me in the sack if there's anything urgent."

When Crane had gone, Dan Brian leaned against the wall and watched Chief Photographers Mate Benton pull the prints out of the slot in the developer.

Benton was an earnest little man with nervous mannerisms.

"Hope to Heaven you don't find anything we have to look at," Dan Brian said sleepily. The photographer gave him an annoyed look.

When the prints were sorted for this first sector, the little man began checking their location against the sector map, using a computer to chart orbits.

He clucked when he found a half degree error in the sector map.

Finally he came to one print. He grew increasingly nervous as he looked at the sector map, clucking and licking his lips.

"What is it?" Dan asked wearily.

"Here's one that isn't recorded. It's up to minimum measurements, but it doesn't appear on the map. The comparison with the infra-red print shows that it has an atmosphere."

"Check it again," Dan said.

"I've checked it three times," the little man snapped. . . .

Captain Crane moaned as Dan shook him awake. Then he listened quietly. When Dan was through he said, "If Benton says it's up to minimum size, then it is. The last census probably got lazy this close to home."

"Can't we be lazy too?"

Crane stared at Dan until the younger man flushed. "Yes sir. I'll

take us over there and call you when it's time to sit down."

Later Captain Crane at the controls, cautiously braked Patrol Eleven below one mile per second before entering the atmosphere of the previously unrecorded planet. Benton had measured it at 4,800 miles circumference at the equator.

It was in orbit around Beta Scorpii at an average radius of 88 million miles, and apparently in that portion of its orbit which, once every few years, took it almost alarmingly close to Arcturus.

He braked further as they descended through the atmosphere, as the sky lightened from black, to purple, to deep blue and the stars disappeared, as the white hard light of Beta Scorpii faded to warm orange-yellow.

The supplementary screen was aimed at the planet below. All four men in the pilot room gasped as they saw the vast ship sprawled against a gentle wooded slope. Trees blurred the edges of it, but the silver metal was still bright and untarnished.

"Measurements!" Captain Crane snapped.

Dan Brian reported five minutes later. "Overall length, sir, twenty-eight hundred feet. Three hundred and ninety feet in thickest cross-section. That makes an index of point-thirteen-ninety-two."

Crane had lost his relaxed air. "Don't just stand there, Mr. Brian. Check the index on the recognition log."

Dan Brian, sweating, did as he was told. In a few moments he said, slowly, "No known military or civil type, sir. Maybe—well, it has obsolete drive. Those tubes look atomic. Some alien intelligence that—"

"Don't talk rot, Mr. Brian! If there were any intelligence in the known universe capable of building that ship, we would have heard of it before now. Use your head and check the historical reference book. Early expeditions."



A FEW moments later Dan Brian gave a muffled gasp. "Well?" Crane said coldly.

"It checks! Sir, that's the *Victrix*! I read about that when I was a little kid. The tenth ship to leave Earth."

Captain Crane stared at the screen. Patrol Eleven hovered, the crashed *Victrix* squarely in the middle of the supplementary screen. Captain Crane seemed to have forgotten the other men in the pilot room. His lips moved. Brian heard him say softly, "A hundred and ten generations ago."

The lean head snapped up. "Take her down, mister."

Dan Brian set Patrol Eleven as close to the hulk as he dared. It was morning on the tiny planet. The sun glittered on the silver hulk. The odd growth, trees with grotesquely thin trunks, had been cleared away from the hulk by unknown hands.

The inside radiation screens were rolled up away from the direct vision ports and all hands stared at the silent forest, at the huge silver shape sprawled across the gentle slope.

Crane got the lab report. "Oxygen atmosphere, but too thin. Grabbed some soil. Nothing dangerous detected. Okay to venture out in suits."

As Captain Crane did not have medical approval for Exploration, Dan Brian headed the group of five.

It happened five minutes after they stepped down onto the soil of the new planet, five minutes after their shoes, heavily weighted with lead, touched the thin, crisp grass.

Dan heard it first. He made a terse report back to the ship, loosened the weapon at his belt and waited.

It was a form of music. A distant thump of drums.

They moved closer to the port out of which they had clambered.

A procession came up over the brow of the hill.

Two of the men promptly became ill, which, clad as they were, was a very messy affair. Dan Brian swallowed hard.

His skin crawled as he watched them. They came close to him, but not too close. They spread out in a half circle and fell to their knees. Their chant resounded in the quiet forest glade. Red blood gushed after the expert thrust of the sacrificial knife.

They bowed low and sang and at last turned and went back the way they had come. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan Brian sat in Captain Crane's cabin.

Dan shook his head slowly. "I don't get it, sir. I've seen how they are on Venus. I've seen intelligent things that looked remotely like beetles, and sea slugs, and birds with scales instead of feathers. But nothing hit me like that did."

It was night, a time for conjecture.

Captain Crane said slowly, "I don't think you are thinking clearly, Dan. Revulsion needs a stepping-off place. Something completely alien is never horrible. It is merely incomprehensible. This is the first time that you or I have ever seen creatures which are sufficiently like men so that the unconscious comparison makes them horrible."

Dan thought it over and nodded slowly. "That must be it. I can see what you mean. A bad scar on one of those Venusians would mean nothing to me. Across the face of a beautiful woman, it would mean a great deal."

Crane sucked on his pipe. Then he examined the dark wood. He said slowly, "They are horrible to us, Dan, because they are men."

Dan laughed uneasily.

"Don't laugh, my boy. I've seen the effects of environment before. Those are the descendents of the survivors of the *Victrix*. Their bodies have merely adjusted to the thin air, the gravity, other factors. Diet. Those are humans."

Dan was closer to being ill than

he had been when he had first seen them. And he knew that Crane was right. It was nightmare.

"But—such a terrific change!" he protested, hoping against hope that Crane was wrong.

"It is extreme," Crane agreed. "Thus nature had help. Selective breeding. Probably all tied up with their religious fetishes."

"But how would they know the change was necessary?"

"Intellectually, they wouldn't, Dan. But some sixth sense would guide them."

"I hate the thought of having to look at them tomorrow."

"It has to be done. We have to examine the ship, examine their village, make a report on customs. You can thank your stars that we don't have to bring one of them back with us for examination. Fortunately we don't have provision for that on this ship. Somebody not as lucky will have that pleasure. Happy dreams to them."

"I'd better turn in," Dan said.

"Read your manual on alien cultures. You'll have to get transcripts, tri-di films, measurements."

Dan went reluctantly to bed. . . .

CAPTAIN CRANE took a nap after Dan Brian had been gone for five hours. He was awakened by Dan, who, a look of excitement on his face, was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Back so soon?" Crane said sleepily.

"Sir, what did you mean by proper provision to take some of those people back with us?"

"I mean that we can't release a compartment to have the air pressure reduced to what they're used to. We can't store their food."

"But, sir, suppose a couple of them can breathe our air, eat our food."

"Are you crazy, mister? Don't you want to be able to eat for the rest of the trip? Has the sun gotten to you?"

"But, sir—"

"Where are these horrors that you want to collect like specimens."

"They're on the ship."

"What!" Captain Crane roared. He jumped to his feet. "Where are they? I'll have you broken for this!"

They were in the main lounge. Captain Crane stopped dead as he saw them. He stared with his mouth open and then he smiled.

The man was strong and well-muscled. His eyes were squinted against the light. In spite of his matted hair and beard, Crane guessed his age at about twenty-five or twenty-six. His gray eyes looked intelligent. He wore trousers borrowed from a crew member.

The girl clung to his hand. They stood close together, not frightened but wary. She seemed to be about eighteen. She was very beautiful. They had dressed her in a sheet from one of the cots.

"There were three of them, sir," Dan said excitedly. "They were underground. That's why they're so pale. The old one died of the shock of being released and seeing us. Anderson, the language guy, has made progress. These two belong to the same race. So that means you were right. They're throwbacks and the treatment is to imprison them, prevent their breeding. Please, sir, can we take them along. They catch on quickly. Imagine finding these two among that race of—of monsters."

\* \* \* \* \*

The words of the other monsters were strange. Pol could not understand them. He could understand the gestures. Anything was better than remaining in that prison under the ground. He was grateful to them. They had released him, had brought him and Lae to the new silver temple, the one that stood upright. Their air inside their temple was heavy and thick, but not unpleasant.



One of the monsters came and beckoned to him. Holding Lae's hand he went through the narrow corridor and came into a small room where chairs were fixed to the floor.

The monster pointed to the screen. He and Lae watched. The screen was dark and suddenly there was a lurching so that they stumbled and nearly fell. In the screen they saw the old temple, dropping away beneath them.

"Lae, we are being taken into the sky in this temple. Are you afraid?"

"Not with you near."

**H**ER hand was warm in his. They watched the earth of their land until it startlingly resembled a small ball, and the height made him weak and dizzy.

Then they were led back to the small room once more and left alone.

Pol looked down into the face of Lae, the Ugly, and he said, "It is better that we go with these, our brothers, who have found freedom."

"Yes, it is better."

"You are not afraid?"

"I am not afraid."

"I have a thought, Lae. Maybe in the place to which they take us, there will be no men or women properly formed. Maybe in time we shall forget what proper men and women look like and we can thus forget that we are incredibly ugly."

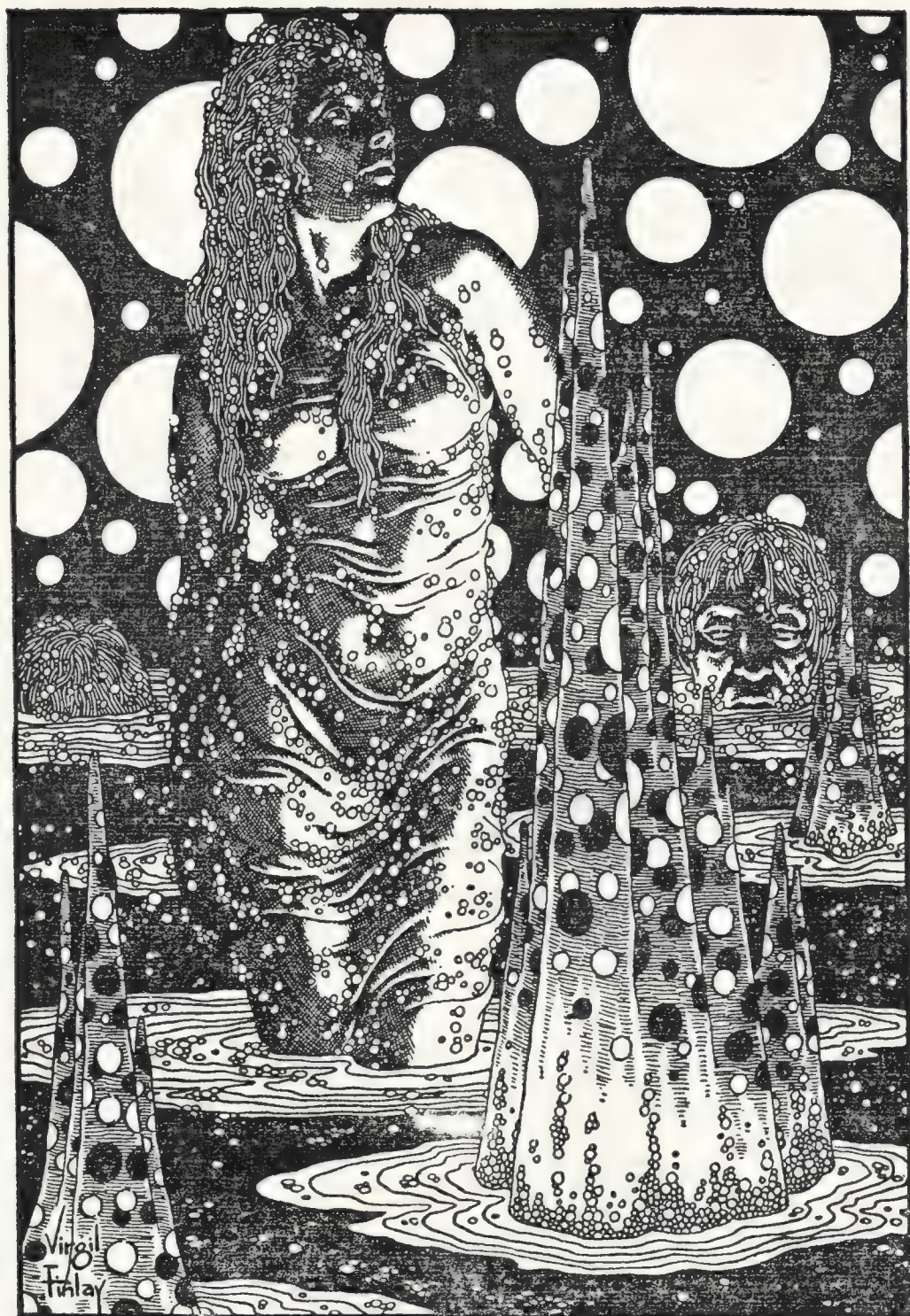
"That may be so," she said softly.

He glanced down and found that he was holding her hand. That puzzled him because none of the other monsters were nearby and thus there was no need of it.

Yet he did not wish to release her. The silver temple moved in silence.









# ATOMIC

BY HENRY KUTTNER

*'An absorbing, terrifying version of how nuclear war might twist mankind*

## I

THE alarm went off just after midnight. The red signal showed emergency. But it was always emergency at first. We all knew that. Ever since the arachnid tribe in the Chicago Ring had mutated we'd known better than to take chances. That time the human race had very nearly gone under. Not many people knew how close we'd been to extinction. But I knew.

Everybody in Biological Control Labs knew. To anyone who lived before the Three-Hour War such things would have sounded incredible. Even to us now they sound hard to believe. But we *know*.

There are four hundred and three Rings scattered all over the world and every one of them is potentially deadly.

Our Lab was north of what had been Yonkers and was a deserted, ruinous wilderness now. The atomic bomb of six years ago hadn't hit Yonkers of course. What it struck was New York. The radiation spread far enough to wipe out Yonkers and the towns beyond it, and inland as far as White Plains—but everyone who lived through the Three-Hour War knows what the bomb did in the New York area.

The war ended incredibly fast. But what lingered afterward made the real danger, the time-bomb that may quite easily lead to the wiping out of our whole civilization. We don't know yet. All we can do is keep the Labs going and the planes out watching.

That's the menace—the mutations.

It was familiar stuff to me. I recorded the televised report on the office ticker, punched a few buttons and turned around to look at Bob Davidson, the new hand. He'd been here for two weeks, mostly learning the ropes.

My assistant, Williams, was due for a vacation and I had about decided to take young Davidson on as a substitute.

"Want to go out and look it over, Dave?" I asked.

"Sure. That's a red alarm, isn't it? Emergency?"

I pulled a mike forward.

"Send up relief men," I ordered, "and wake Williams to take over. Get the recon copter ready. Red flight." Then I turned to Davidson.

"It'll be routine," I told him, "unless something unexpected happens. Not much data yet. The sky-scanners showed a cave-in and some activity around it. May be nothing but we can't take chances. It's Ring Seventy-Two."

"That's where the air liner crashed last week, isn't it?" Dave asked, looking up with renewed interest. "Any dope yet on what became of the passengers?"

"Nothing. The radiations would have got them if nothing else did. That's in the closed file now, poor devils. Still, we might spot the ship." I stood up. "The whole thing may be a wild-geese chase but we never take any chances with the Rings."

"It ought to be interesting, any-

how," Dave said and followed me out.

We could see it from a long way off. Four hundred and three of them dot the world now, but in the days before the War no one could have imagined such a thing as a Ring and it would be hard to make anyone visualize one through bare description. You have to *feel* the desolation as you fly over that center of bare, splashed rock in which nothing may ever grow again until the planet itself disintegrates, and see around that dead core the violently boiling life of the Ring.

It was a perimeter of life brushed by the powers of death. The sun-forces unleashed by the bombs gave life, a new, strange, mutable life that changed and changed and changed and would go on changing until a balance was finally struck again on this world which for three hours reeled in space under the blows of an almost cosmic disaster. We were still shuddering beneath the aftermath of those blows. The balance was not yet.

When the hour of balance comes, mankind may no longer be the dominant race. That's why we keep such a close watch on all the Rings. From time to time we work them over with flame-throwers. Only atomic power, of course, would quiet that seething life permanently—which is no solution. We've got Rings enough right now without resorting to more atom bombs.

It's a hydra-headed problem without an answer. All we can do is watch, wait, be ready. . . .

**T**HE world was still dark. But the Ring itself was light, with a strange, pale, luminous radiance that might mean anything. It was new. That was all we knew about it yet.

"Let's have the scanner," I said to Davidson. He handed me the mask and I pushed the head-clips past my ears and settled the monocular view-plate before my eyes, expecting to see the darkness melt into the reversed vision of the night-scanner.

It melted, all right—the part that didn't matter. I could see the negative images of trees and ruined houses standing ghostly pale against the dark. But within the Ring—nothing.

It wasn't good. It could be very bad indeed. In silence I pulled off the mask and handed it to Davidson, watched him look down. When he turned I could see his troubled frown through the monocular lens even before he lowered the scanner. He looked a little pale in the light of the instrument board.

"Well?" he asked.

"Looks as if they'd hit on something good this time," I said.

"They?"

"Who knows? Could be anything this time. You know how the life-forms shoot up into mutations without the least warning. Something's done it again down there. Maybe something that's been quietly working away underground for a long time, just waiting for the right moment. Whatever it is they can stop the scanners and that isn't an easy thing to do."

"The first boys over reported a cave-in," Davidson said, peering futilely down. "Could you see anything?"

"Just the luminous fog. Nothing inside. Total blackout. Well, maybe daylight will show us what's up. I hope so."

It didn't. A low sea of yellow-gray fog billowed slowly in a vast circle over the entire Ring as far as we could see. Dead central core and outer circle of unnatural life had vanished together into that mist which no instrument we had could penetrate—and we've developed a lot of stuff for seeing through fog and darkness. This was solid. We couldn't crack it.

"We'll land," I told Davidson finally. "Something's going on behind that shield, something that doesn't want to be spied on. And somebody's got to investigate—fast! It might as well be us."

We wore the latest development in the way of lead-suits, flexible and



easy on the body. We snapped our face-plates shut as the ground came up to meet us and the little Geiger-counter each of us carried began to tick erratically, like a sort of Morse code mechanically spelling out the death in the air we sank through.

I was measuring the ground below for a landing when Davidson grabbed my shoulder suddenly, pointing down.

"Look!" His voice came tinnily through the ear-diaphragms in my helmet. I looked.

Now this is where the story gets difficult to tell.

I know what I saw. That much was clear to me from start to finish. I saw an eye looking up through the pale mist at us. But whether it was an enormous lens far below or a normal-sized eye close to us I couldn't have said just then. My distance-sense had stopped functioning.

I stared into the Eye. . . .

The next thing I remember is sitting in the familiar lab office across the desk from Williams, hearing myself speaking.

"...no signs of activity anywhere in the Ring. Perfectly normal—"

"There's that lake, of course," Davidson interrupted in a conscientious voice. I looked at him. He was turning his cap over and over in his hands as he sat there by the wall. His pink-cheeked face was haggard and there was something strained and dazed in the glance he turned to meet mine. I knew I looked dazed too.

It was like waking out of a dream, knowing you've dreamed, knowing you're awake now—but having the dream go on—being powerless to stop it. I wanted to jump up and slam my fist on the desk and shout that all this was phony.

I couldn't.

Something like a tremendously powerful psychic inhibition held me down. The room swam before me for a moment with my effort to break free and I met Davidson's eyes and saw the same swimming strain in them.

It wasn't hypnosis.

**W**E DON'T win our posts in Bio Control until we've been through exhaustive tests and a lot of heavy training. None of us are hypnosis-prone. We can't afford to be. It's been tried.

We *can't* be hypnotized except under very special circumstances safeguarded by Bio Control itself.

No, the answer wasn't that easy. It seemed to lie in—myself. Some door had slammed in the center of my brain, to shut in vital information that must not escape—yet—under any circumstances at all.

The minute I hit on that analogy I knew I was on the right trail. I felt safer and surer of myself. Whatever had happened in that blank space just passed my instinct was in control now. I could trust that instinct.

"...break-through, just as the boys reported," Davidson was saying. "That must be what started the lake pouring up. Nothing stirring there now, though. I suppose the regular sky-scanners are watching it?"

His glance crossed mine and I knew he was right. I knew he was talking to me, not Williams. Of course the lake couldn't be hidden now that it was out in plain sight. We couldn't make a worse mistake than to rouse interest in ourselves and the lake by telling obvious lies about it. . . .

What lake?

Like a mirage, swimming slowly back through my mind, the single memory came. Ourselves, standing on the raw, bare rock of the deathly Ring-center, looking through a rift of mist like a broad, low window a mile long and not very high.

The lake was incredibly blue in the dawn, incredibly calm. Beyond it a wall of cliff stretched left and right beyond our vision, a wall like a great curtain of rock hanging in majestic folds, pink in the pink dawn, looming about its perfect image reflected in the mirror of the lake.

THE mirage dissolved. That much I could remember—no more. There was a lake. We had stood on its rocky shore. And then—what? Reason told me we must have seen something, or heard or learned something, that made the lake a deadly danger to mankind.

I knew that feel of naked terror deep in my mind must have a cause. But all I could do now was follow my instinct. The basic human instincts I told myself, are self preservation and preservation of the species. If I rely on that foundation I can't go wrong...

But—I didn't know how long I'd been back here. I didn't know how much I'd said, or how little—what orders I'd given to my subordinates, or whether anything in my outward aspect had roused any suspicion yet.

I looked around—and this time gave a perfectly genuine start of surprise. Except for Williams and myself the office was quite empty. In this last bout with my daydreaming memory I must really have lost touch with things.

Williams was looking at me with—curiosity? Suspicion?

I rubbed my eyes, put weariness in my voice.

"I'm tired," I said. "Almost dozed off, didn't I? Well—"

The sound of the ticker behind Williams interrupted my alibi. I knew in a moment what was happening. A televised report had come into my own office which my secretary was switching to the ticker for me. That meant it was important. It also meant—as I had reason to hope an instant later—that the visor was shut off in my office and the news clicking directly here for our eyes alone.

Leaning over Williams' shoulder, I read the tape feeding through.

It read—

*Unidentified activities in progress around new Ring lake. Suggest destroyers work over area.*

*Fitzgerald.*

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Only one thing stood clear in my mind's confusion—*this must not happen*. There was some terrible, some deadly danger to the whole fabric of civilization if Fitzgerald's message reached any other eyes than ours. I had to do something fast.

Williams was rereading the tape. He glanced up at me across his shoulder.

"Fitz is right," he said. "Of course. Can't let anything get started down there. Better wipe it out right now, hadn't we?"

I said, "No!" so explosively that he froze in the act of reaching for the interoffice switch.

"Why not?" He stared at me in surprise.

I opened my mouth and closed it again hopelessly, knowing the right words wouldn't come. To me it seemed so self-evident I couldn't even explain why we must disregard the message. It would be like trying to tell a man why he mustn't touch off an atom bomb out of sheer exuberance—the reasons were so many and so obvious I couldn't choose among them.

"You weren't there. You don't know." My voice sounded thick and unsteady even to me. "Fitz is wrong. *Let that lake alone, Williams!*"

"You ought to know." He gave me a strange look. "Still, I've got to record the report. Headquarters will make the final decision." And he reached again for the switch.

I'm not sure how far I would have gone toward stopping him. Instinct deeper than all reason seemed to explode in me in the urgent forward surge that brought me to my feet. I had to stop him—now—without delay—taking no time to delve into my mind and dredge up a reason he would accept as valid.

But the decision was taken out of our hands.

A burst of soundless white fire flashed blindingly across my eyes. It blotted out Williams, it blotted out the ticker with its innocent, deadly mes-



sage. I was aware of a killing pain in the very center of my skull. . . .

## II

SOMEONE was shaking me. I sat up dizzily, meeting a stare that I recognized only after what seemed infinities of slow waking. Davidson, his pink face frightened, shook me again.

"What happened? What was it? Jim, are you all right? Wake up, Jim! What was it?"

I let him help me to my feet. The room began to steady around me but it reeled sharply again when I saw what lay before the ticker, the tape looping down about him—face down on the floor, blood still crawling from the bullet hole in his back. . . .

Williams never saw who got him. It must have been the same flash that blinded me. I felt my cheek for the powder burn that must have scorched it as the unseen killer fired past my face. I felt only numbness. I was numb all over, even my brain. But one thing had to be settled in a hurry.

How much time had elapsed? Had that deadly message gone out while I lay here helpless? I made it to the ticker in two unsteady strides. The tape that looped the fallen Williams still bore its dangerous message.

Whoever fired past my cheek had fired for another reason, then, than this message. Of course, for how could anyone else have known its importance? There was a bewildering mystery here but I had no time to think about it.

I tore off the tape, crumpled it into my pocket. I flipped the ticker switch and sent a reverse message out as fast as my shaking hand could operate the machine.

*Fitzgerald urgent urgent meet me at ring post 27 am leaving headquarters now do nothing until I arrive urgent signed J. Owen.*

Davidson watched me, round-eyed, as I vised for a helicopter. He put out his hand as I turned toward the door. I forced myself to stop and think.

"Well?" I said.

He didn't speak. He only glanced at Williams' body on the floor.

"No," I said. "I didn't kill him. But I might have if that had turned out to be the only way. There's trouble at the lake." I hesitated. "You were there too, Dave. Do you know what I mean?" I wasn't quite sure what I was trying to find out. I waited for his answer.

"You're the boss," was all he said. "Still, it wasn't any mutation that did this. It was a bullet. You've got to know who shot him, Jim."

"I don't though. I blanked out. Something. . ." My mind whirled and then steadied again with a sudden idea. I put a hand to my forehead, dizzy with trying to remember things still closed to me.

"Maybe something like a mutation had a part in it at that," I conceded. "Maybe we're not alone in wanting to—to keep the lake quiet. I wonder—could something from the Ring have blanked me out deliberately, so I wouldn't see Williams killed?"

But there wasn't time to follow even that speculation through. I said impatiently, "The point is, Dave, one man's death doesn't mean a thing right now. The Ring. . ." I stopped unable to go on. I didn't need to.

"What do you want me to do?" Davidson asked. That was better. I knew I could depend on him, and I might need someone dependable very soon.

"Take over here," I said. "I'm going to see Fitzgerald. And listen, Dave, this is urgent. Hold any messages Fitzgerald sends. *Any!* Understand?"

"Check," he said. His eyes were still asking questions as I went out. Neither of us could answer them—yet.

The desolation spun past below me, aftermath of the Three-Hour War,

ruined buildings, ruined fields, ruined woods. Far off I could catch a pale gleam of water beyond the seething edge of the Ring.

I'd been en route long enough to make some sort of order in my mind—but I hadn't done it. Evidently more than time would be required to open the closed doors in my brain. I had been in the Ring today—I had seen something or learned something there—and whatever I learned had been of such vital and terrible import that memory of it was wiped from Davidson's mind and mine until the hour came for action.

I didn't know what hour or what action. But I knew with a deep certainty that when the time for decision came I would not falter. Along with the terror and the blackness in my mind went that one abiding knowledge upon which all my actions now were based. I could trust that instinct.

Fitzgerald's copter was waiting. I could see his lead-suited figure, tiny and far below, pacing up and down impatiently as I dropped toward him. My copter settled lightly earthward. And for a moment another thought crossed my mind.

Williams! A man murdered, a man I knew and had worked with. A man I liked. That should have affected me much more deeply than it did. I knew why it hadn't. Williams' death was unimportant—completely trivial in the face of the—the other peril that loomed namelessly, in all its invisible menace, like a shrouded ghost rising from the lake beyond us.

**F**ITZGERALD was a big blond man with blue eyes and a scar puckering his forehead, souvenir of our last battle with mutated marmosa in the Atlanta Ring. His transmitter-disc vibrated tinnily as I got out of the copter.

"Hello, chief. You got my second message?"

"No. What was it?"

"More funny stuff." He gestured

toward the Ring. "In the lake this time—signs of life. I can't make anything out of it."

I drew a deep breath of relief. Davidson would have stopped that message. It was up to me now to find a way to keep Fitzgerald quiet. "We'll take a look at the lake, then," I said. "What's your report?"

"Well. . . ." He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, glancing at me through his face-plate as if he didn't quite expect me to believe him. "It's a funny place, that lake. I got the impression it was—well, watching me."

"I know it sounds silly but I have to tell you. It could be important, I suppose. And then when I was making a second turn over the the water I saw something in the lake." He paused. "People," he added after a moment.

"What kind of people?"

"I—they weren't human."

"How do you know?"

"They weren't wearing lead suits," he said simply, glad of a chance to pin his story down with facts. "I figured they were either not human or else insane. They heard my ship. And they went into the lake."

"Swimming?"

"They walked in. Right under the water. And they stayed there."

"What did they look like?"

"I didn't get a close look," he said evasively, his eyes troubled as they avoided mine.

I was aware of a strange, mounting excitement that swelled in my throat until I could hardly speak. I jerked my head toward the lake.

"Come on," I said.

There lay the blue water, moving gently in the breeze. The cliffs like folded curtains rose beyond it. There was no sign of life in sight as we crossed the bare, pitted rock. Fitzgerald eyed me askance as we clumped toward the water in our heavy lead-lined boots. I knew he expected doubt from me.

But I knew also that he had told



the truth. The lost memory of danger sent its premonitory shadows through my mind and I believed, dimly, that I too had seen those aquatic people, sometime in that immediate past which had been expunged from my brain.

We were halfway across the rocks, our Geiger-counters clicking noisy warning of the death in the air all around us, when the first of the lake people rose up before us from behind a ledge of rock.

He was a perfectly normal looking man—except that he stood there in khaki trousers and shirt, sleeves rolled up, in the bath of potent destruction which was the very air of the Ring. He looked at us with a blankness impossible to describe and yet with a strangely avid interest in his eyes.

When we were half a dozen paces away he raised his arm and, without changing expression, in a voice totally without inflection, he spoke.

"Go back," he said. "Go back. Get away from here, now!"

*It was all returning to me. . . I knew why he looked so strange, why he spoke so flatly, why that interest watched us from his eyes. . .*

I didn't know. The knowledge brushed the edges of my awareness and withdrew. I stumbled forward, Fitzgerald beside me excited and eager, calling out a question to the man.

He made no answer. He took one last look at us, blank, intent, impersonal, his eyes as blue as the water in the lake. And then he dropped straight downward, without stooping, without seeming to move a muscle. He vanished behind the knee-high ledge of rock.

We reached it together, shouldering one another in our eagerness. We bent over the ledge. The man had disappeared, leaving no sign behind him. Nothing but a little hollow in the rock where he had stood, a hollow no bigger than a saucer, in which blue water swayed. We stood there half stunned, for the time it took the water to gurgle downward and vanish in the

hole and surge up again twice from some action of subterranean waters.

Memory was battering at the closed doors of my mind.

I *knew* the answer. I knew it well—but the door stayed shut. The time to remember was not yet.

THEY were watching us from the edge of the water by the time we had come within hailing distance. One by one we saw them wade up from the blue depths and take their stand in the edge of the water, ankle deep, rivulets running from their hair and clothing—drowned men and women, watching us.

They weren't drowned, of course. They looked perfectly healthy and there was more intelligence and animation in their faces than had looked at us from the vanished man of the ledge.

These were real people. The other had not been. I thought that much must be evident even to Fitzgerald, though it was a subterranean knowledge running through my mind that told me so.

"Wait, Jim," Fitzgerald said suddenly, catching my elbow. "I—don't like 'em. Stand back." He was watching the silent people in the water.

I let him stop me. Now that I was here I wasn't certain what came next. The terrible urgency still rang its alarm in the closed room of my brain but until I could gain entry into that room I wouldn't know what was expected of me.

Fitzgerald waved to the people in the water, a beckoning gesture. They stared at us.

Then they turned and talked briefly together, glancing at us over their shoulders. Finally one of the women came up out of the lake and picked her way toward us over the lava-like rock.

She had long fair hair sleeked back from her face by the water and hanging like pale kelp across her shoulders.

Her blue dress clung to her over a beautiful, supple body, water splattering from the dripping cloth and the dripping hair as she came.

Belatedly I remembered that crashed airliner and its vanished people. Were these the passengers and crew? I thought they were. But what had induced them against all reason to come this far into the deadly air of the Ring? The lake? Up to that point the thing was possible, but it was sheer madness from the moment I imagined them entering the water.

The lake, then? Was there something inexplicably strange and compelling about the lake itself that had drawn them in and sent them out again like this, alive, unharmed in the singing air that made our counters clatter?

I looked out over the waters for an answer, and—

And I got my answer—or part of it.

For out there on the rippling blue surface a shadow moved. A long, coiling shadow cast not from above but from below. Deep down in the lake something was stirring.

I strained my eyes and in the sealed deeps of my mind terror and exultation moved in answer to that coiling darkness. I knew it. I recognized it. I...The recognition passed.

The vast shadow moved lazily, monstrosously, moved and coiled and drew itself in under the cliffs.

Slowly it disappeared, coil by coil, shadow by shadow.

I turned. The fair-haired woman was standing before us, gazing into our faces with a remote, impersonal curiosity. It was as if she had never seen another human creature before and found us interesting but—disassociated. No species that might share relationship with her.

"You're from the liner?" I asked, my voice reverberating in my own ears inside the helmet. "We—we can take you back." I let the words die. They meant nothing to her. They

meant no more than the clatter of our belt-counters or the patter of drops around her on the rocks.

"Jim." Fitzgerald's voice buzzed in my earphones. "Jim, we've got to take her back with us. She's out of her head. They all are—don't you see? We've got to save them."

"How?" I tried to sound practical. "We haven't got room. There's a full liner load here."

"We can take this one." He reached out and took her arm gently. She let him, her eyes turning that remote, impersonal gaze upon his face. "It's probably too late," he said, looking at her with compassion, "but we can't leave her here, can we?"

I was watching his hand on her arm and a thought came to me out of nowhere, a fact that seemed to slip through the closed doors in my mind as they opened a tiny crack. This girl was flesh and blood. A hand closed on her arm met firm resistance. But I knew that if I had touched that first man my hand would have closed over the smooth instability of water.

I looked at the girl's face where a passing breeze brushed it, and a shiver went down my back. For it was a warm breeze, drying her hair and cheek where it blew—and I saw dark, wrinkled desiccation wherever dryness touched her skin. The sleek fair hair lost its silkiness and turned brown and brittle, the satiny cheek darkened, furrowed....

I knew if she left the lake she would die. But it didn't matter. I knew there was no actual danger, either way. (*Danger to what? From what? No use asking myself that yet—the door would be open in its own time.*)

I took her other arm. Between us she went docilely toward the waiting copters, saying nothing. I don't think Fitzgerald noticed what that drying breeze was doing to her until we were nearly at the edge of the Ring.

By then it was too late to take her back even if he had understood what the trouble was.



I heard Fitzgerald catch his breath but he said nothing and neither did I.

We lifted her into his copter. I took off behind him and the visors were silent between our ships as we flew back toward Base. What could we have said to each other then?

### III

**T**HIRTY minutes after we hit the Base the girl was in a jury-rigged hydrating tank, wrapped in wet sheets, with a slow trickle of fresh warm water soaking them. Even her face was loosely covered, and I was glad of that. It was an old woman's face by now, drawn tight and furrowed over her skull. Only an arm was bare, shriveled flesh beneath which the tendons stood sharply etched.

The arm was bare for the needle that fed sodium pentothol into a vein, slowly, under the watchful eye of Sales, one of our best Base medics. We knew that presently, when the drug began to cloud her mind, Sale's skillful questions would start drawing out the memories of what had happened to her, reconstructing the basic scenes which had led to—this.

Or—we hoped they would

"It looks like aphasia," Sales murmured. "No brain injury so far as we know yet, but—"

"Chief!" It was Davidson, touching my arm. We all turned in the half-darkness that was part of this narcosynthesis treatment. "Chief, the Mobile Staff's on its way down here. They vised after you left."

"What for?" I asked sharply, a nervous dread knotting my stomach.

"I don't know. They wouldn't say. You're the boss, after all."

But I wasn't the boss of Mobile Staff. They were bigger than I, the bureau of specialists that controlled the administration of all the Rings. They were the bosses. And if they came here now...

I caught Davidson's eye in the

gloom. Very slightly he shook his head. The secret of Williams' death was still safe, then. But not for long. And if the Staff talked to Fitzgerald about the lake...

I made an enormous effort and fought down the rising panic. Information first. Then action. I had to keep that order.

Sales grunted and I looked back, forcing my attention to the business at hand.

"She must have the tolerance of an elephant," Sales said, eyeing the tube through which sodium pentothol still fed into the girl's arm. "Or else there's some chemical metamorphosis—I don't know. I've given her enough to put a dozen men to sleep. But look at her."

I didn't like to look at her. It was obvious to me that she was dying. Yet when Sales pushed the wet sheets back from her face the impersonal, disinterested attention still dwelt upon the ceiling, fully awake, uncaring, hearing nothing we said, feeling nothing we did.

Fitzgerald said, "How could she have breathed under water?"

"She couldn't," Sales scowled at him. "There's no physiological change at all. Her respiratory system's normal."

"She must have," Fitzgerald said stubbornly. "I know what we saw."

"Anything's possible in a Ring," Sales admitted, voicing an aphorism. "But I don't see how it could have worked." He looked up at me. "How important is this, chief?"

I told him.

"Give me an hour," Sales said briefly when I had finished. "I'm going to try something else. Several other things. Maybe one of 'em will work."

"One of 'em's got to," I told him.

**I**N THAT hour a lot happened. Sales found what he wanted, for one thing. For another, the Mobile Staff arrived. Williams' body was found. And as for me—it was the hour that marked the turning point in my life.

Williams' death was reported on my private visor as soon as I got back to my office. I could feel Davidson's silence like a tangible thing as he listened to the exclamations and incredulity of the others.

All I could do was order the usual investigations got under way immediately. At that moment I decided not to speak of my own presence when he died. I couldn't let myself be diverted by useless questions on a subject only distantly related to my own terrible problem.

Worse than ever that deathly fear was stirring restlessly behind the closed doors of my unconscious. I knew the doors would swing open soon. Little by little they had let facts escape the barrier, and the barrier itself would be ready to fall. . . . Soon, I thought, soon.

Looking back now I lose my time-sense about that eventful hour. I think we were still lost in dismayed wonder over Williams when the visor flickered and then framed the grim, creased face of Mobile Staff's chief, Lewis.

There was a hunted, nightmare quality about this piling of crisis upon crisis, I thought, as I went down to the reception hall to welcome my superiors. If only I could find five minutes of peace to try again those slowly opening doors!

Mobile Staff wears black uniforms. If all Bio employees are carefully tested then Mobile men are screened with such stringent care that there is reason to marvel how anyone ever passes their tests. All of these men in their severe black looked taut, nervous, keen with an edge almost ruthless in its steely temper.

"What about this lake development in Ring Seventy-Twelve?" was the first thing Lewis said to me as we walked back toward my office. It couldn't have been worse, I told myself. If they had timed themselves deliberately they couldn't have chosen a worse time.

"Three of us have seen it closely," was all I answered. "You'll want to dis-

cuss it with us in detail, I suppose."

Lewis nodded crisply. We didn't speak again until we were settled in my office, Davidson and Fitzgerald ready for questions beside me. We told what—overtly—we knew. It was Lewis, of course, who spoke with decision.

"I think we'd better destroy the thing pronto."

"Frankly, sir—" this was Davidson—"—frankly, I'd think that over first. The thing's isolated, whatever it is. We'd run the risk of scattering it abroad."

"I incline that way myself," I said quickly. "Isolation. Ring it off, reroute air traffic. Leave it alone and study it. . . study it?" I suspected that was wrong. A warning bell had clanged in my brain.

Lewis sat there silently, shifting his keen glance from face to face. Just as he drew his breath to speak my desk visor buzzed.

"Report ready on Williams' death, sir," an impersonal voice said.

"All right. Hold it awhile," I began. But Lewis bent forward and gave the face in the visor a narrowed glance.

"No, let's have it right now," he said. Despairingly I wondered how much he knew and how much that abnormally keen brain had guessed already of the undercurrents running swiftly beneath the surface of events here.

The face in the visor glanced at me. I shrugged. Lewis was boss as long as Mobile Staff remained here.

"Body of J. L. Williams, assistant to chief, was found in a locker in his own office forty minutes ago," the report began. "The shot was fired from. . . ." The voice went off into medical and ballistic details I ceased to hear. I was turning over in my mind crazy questions about how I could prevent an immediate close study of the lake at the very best, and at the worst its destruction.

". . . revolver of this caliber possessed only by Chief Owen himself," the visor



declared. I woke with a start. "Last men seen with the deceased were Robert Davidson and Chief Owen. Chief Owen subsequently suppressed a report from Ring Station 27 and ordered a copter for immediate departure. He then took off for—"

The visor buzzed suddenly and the monotoned report blanked out. It was an emergency interruption. Very briefly Dr. Sales' face flashed upon the screen.

"This is urgent, Chief," he said, looking into my eyes significantly. "Could you spare me five minutes in my lab right now?"

It seemed like a heaven-sent relief. I glanced at Lewis for permission. His gaze was cold and suspicious but he nodded after a moment and I got up with a single look at Davidson's deliberately blank face and went out.

SOMETHING prompted me to pause at the door after I had closed it. I was not really surprised to hear Lewis' harsh voice.

"See that Chief Owen doesn't leave the building before I've talked to him again. That's an urgent. Give it priority."

I shrugged. Things were beyond my control now. All I could do was ride along and trust to instinct.

Although Sales had asked for only five minutes of my time, he seemed oddly reluctant to begin. I sat down across the desk from him and watched him fidget with his desk blotter. Finally he looked up and spoke abruptly.

"You know the girl died, of course."

"I expected it. When?"

"Half an hour ago. I've been doing some quick thinking since then. And a lot of quick analyses. There hasn't been time yet to check, but I think she died of psychosomatic causes, chief."

"That's hard to credit," I said. "Tell me about it."

"She was a perfectly normal specimen by all quantitative and qualitative tests. I think suggestion killed her."

"But how?"

"You know you can hypnotize a subject, touch his arm with ice and tell him it's red-hot metal. Typical burn weals will appear. Most physical symptoms can be induced by suggestion. That girl died of dehydration and asphyxia as far as I can tell."

"We gave her moisture and oxygen."

"She didn't know it was oxygen. She didn't think she was breathing at all. So her motor reflexes were paralyzed and—she died. As for the hydrating apparatus..." Sales shook his head in a bewildered way. "This sounds crazy but I think our mistake there was in giving her water as a hydrating factor. Chief, how closely did you see that lake? Do you know that it's *water*?"

Again that bell seemed to ring in my head. *Water? Water? Of course it isn't water, not as we've known water up to now.*

"Until I thought of that," Sales went on, "I couldn't understand her apparent breathing under water. Now I think I'm beginning to understand. A liquid can't be breathed by human beings, but there could be—well, artificial isotopes that would do the trick. Also, something drove that girl insane."

"I think she was insane. You might call it a variant of schizophrenia. Or possession if you prefer. Her mind was completely blanketed and subjugated by—something else." He drummed on the desk. Then, looking up sharply, he said, "I got samples of the lake's—water. From her body. It's not water."

"Maybe it once was but now it's mixed with other compounds. The stuff seems half alive. Not protoplasm but close to it. I can't evaporate or break it down with any chemical I've yet tried."

"There are traces of hemoglobin. In fact, the stuff has many of the attributes of blood. But—and this is important, Chief—I couldn't find traces of a single leukocyte. You see what that means?"

I shook my head.

"One of the primary results of ex-

posing an organism to radioactivity is a reduction of the number of white cells, making it subject to infection. The proportion of polymorphonuclear white cells goes down relatively. That's axiomatic. But surely you see what it suggests!"

Again I shook my head. A deep uneasiness was mounting in me but I had to hear him out before I acted. I knew I'd have to act. I think I knew already what I would have to do before I left this room. But I wanted to hear the rest of his story first. I signaled him to go on.

"Another thing I observed about the—call it water," he said carefully, "was the presence of considerable boron and some lithium. Of course the whole Ring area is subject to constant radiations of all kinds, but the important ones just now are the hard electromagnetic and the nuclear radiations that produce biological reactions.

"I suppose you remember that boron and lithium both tend to concentrate the effects of a bombardment of slow neutrons, so an organism like the lake would get a very heavy dose of the radiations that have the greatest effect on it."

"The lake—an organism?" I echoed.

"I think it is. Up to now we've come into conflict only with evolved and mutated creatures that were recognizable as animals even before genetic changes took place. One reason might be that mutated genes divide more slowly than others and tend to lose out in the race for supremacy.

"A complete mutation like—this lake—is something nobody really expected. The odds are too heavy against it. But we've known it could happen. And I think this time we're up against something dangerous. Big and dangerous and impossible to understand."

I leaned forward. *I knew what I had to do. Now? No, not quite yet. Inside my mind the closed doors were moving slowly, swinging wider and wider, while behind them pressed the crowding memories of danger which*

*would burst the barrier at any moment now.*

"Forget all that for awhile," Sales said with a sudden change of expression. "I talked to the girl before she died. I'm taking cross-bearings on my conclusion, Chief. One line I've already indicated. The second is what the girl said. They check." He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I had to blank her mind clear down to the lowest articulate levels," he said, "before I could cut back under whatever compulsion it was that killed her. She didn't know she was talking. I hadn't much time—she was dying as she spoke. But from what she said I've pieced a theory together." He paused. "Tell me, did you see anything at all during your experiences with the lake to make you suspect it might be—alive?"

#### IV

WITH stunning suddenness, out of my memory came the vision of a great eye staring up at me through the pale fog as I maneuvered our copter above the Ring when Davidson and I first visited it.

*The Eye was the lake, a vast translucent lens that had caught us like birds in a nest and drawn us down. The power of its compelling summons pouring from the lens into our brains, like sunshine into a darkened room.*

"No," I said thickly. "No, I saw nothing. Go on."

"What its origin was I can't even guess," Sales said. "But originally some molecule like a gene, out of a million other molecules in that Ring area, suffered a liberation of energy when a secondary ionizing particle shot past and it changed from a gene to—something else. Something that grew and grew and grew.

"Most of the development must have taken place underground. I think the organism was complete when that cave-in occurred that exposed it to the light and to our attentions. It developed



amazingly, into forms so complex we may never understand them exactly." He smiled grimly.

"If we're lucky we never will. I can tell you this much, though—it recognized its danger. Perhaps electric impulses from our own brains struck answering chords in the—the organism. And it knew it had to defend itself, fast.

"Now the lake has one fatal weakness. By that I think we can destroy it. I believe the organism is quite aware of this because of the way it chose to combat us." He paused, looking at me so strangely that I almost acted in that silent moment. But just as I was gathering my muscles to rise, he began again.

"The girl told me what happened when that air-liner came down. It must have been sheer accident, its making a forced landing at the edge of the Ring. Radioactivity blanked out their communications and of course the air itself was close to deadly. There didn't seem any hope at all for the people in the ship.

"The girl said many of them complained of feeling—well, call it *attention*—focused on them. I know now it was the lake itself, that gigantic organism, studying them, slowly working around to a decision about its next move. Then it came to a conclusion that may not yet have reached its final equation.

"The passengers saw a man stand up from behind a rock near them. The girl said he looked familiar. He shouted and waved them away. He warned them it would mean their death if they came closer. He vanished. But the passengers were still trying to get a message out and they stayed in the ship. The man appeared three times in all, each time warning them away in stronger and stronger terms.

"Finally he rose from behind a rock very near them and this time he invited them into the Ring. They were surprised to find that when seen this close he was a mirror image of one

of their crew members. The image beckoned and ordered them in. They didn't want to obey. But they went.

"That image, as you may have deduced, was a water-figure created by the lake itself, no one knows how completely. It may have been ninety percent illusion, shaped in the minds of the watchers. But you'll notice the lake had to imitate one of the crew. It didn't at that time know enough about human bodies to improvise.

"It did know a lot, though, about human minds. In fact, its power over them and its amazing selectivity make me suspect that the original gene from which the organism developed might once have been human or close to it.

"The water image was the lake's first attempt to fight off mankind. The attempt failed. In other words an imitation wouldn't do. But the real thing was close at hand for experimentation.

"What happened next no one will ever know. Logically the organism must have moved forward another step in its defense against invasion by mankind. In effect it created antibodies. It was inoculating itself with the virus of humanity in an effort to immunize itself against a later attack.

"But it had to effect a change in the humans before it could absorb them. Physically they must be changed to live under the lake and mentally they had to alter radically to stay there of their own will. It was their will the lake attacked. You saw that.

"I said before that *something* had apparently been washed from the mind of that girl we saw and some other basic drive substituted in her. I believe now I was nearer the truth than I guessed." He looked at me keenly, almost speculatively.

"If I were in a spot like that," he said, "with the problem of altering a human being's whole emotional outlook, I think I'd strike straight at the root. It would be much simpler than trying to blanket his impulses with anything like hypnotism, for instance.

"I think that for the instinct of self-

preservation those people now have another drive—instinct for the preservation of the Organism. It would be so simple, and it would work so well.”

**T**HERE was a roaring in my ears. For a moment I heard nothing of what Sales said. *The flood-gates had opened and through the backflung doors all my memories were pouring.*

“But it hasn’t worked perfectly,” Sales was saying from far away. “Unless the lake goes a step further, we can destroy it. Perhaps it has. Perhaps it realizes that static antibodies which can’t exist outside its own bloodstreams won’t help much.

“Do you think, chief, that it might have captured still other humans and worked its basic change in their minds? Could it have implanted in men *like yourself* a shift in instinct so that you know only one basic drive—the Organism must be preserved?”

The idea had struck him suddenly. I could see that in his face as he leaned forward across the desk, half rising, his features congesting with the newness and the terrible danger of the thought.

I didn’t even get up from my chair. I’d had my revolver out on my knee for the past several minutes, though he couldn’t see it from where he sat.

I shot him at close range, through the chest.

For a moment he hung there above the desk, his hands gripping the blotter convulsively. He had one thing more to say but it was hard for him to get it out. He tried twice before he made it.

“You—it’s no good,” he said very thinly. “Can’t—stop me now. I’ve sent—full report—Mobile Staff—reading it now.”

Blood cut off whatever else he wanted to say. I watched impersonally as it bubbled from his lips and he collapsed forward into the scarlet puddle forming so fast on the desk top. I saw how the blotter took it up

at first but the fountain ran too fast and finally a trickle began to spill over the desk edge and patter on the floor with a sound like the dripping of lake water from that girl’s garments as she crossed the rocks toward us.

*The lake was blue and wonderful in the sunlight. It was the most important thing in the world. If anything happened to destroy it I knew the world would end in that terrible, crashing moment. All my mind and all my effort must be dedicated to protecting it from the danger threatening it now.*

A knock at the door banished that vision. I sprang to my feet and blocked off the desk from sight.

Davidson lunged into the room, slammed the door, put his back to it. He was breathing hard.

“They’re after you, Jim,” he said. “They know about Williams.”

I nodded. I knew too, now. I knew why my mind had gone blank when the need to silence Williams was paramount. At that time it wasn’t safe for me to know too much about my own actions, my own motives. Oh yes, I had killed him, all right.

“You knew all along?” I asked him. He nodded.

“You’ve got to do something quick, Jim,” he said. “I tell you, they’re coming! They know we were there together and they’re almost certain you did it. Fingerprints, bullet type—think of something, Jim! I—”

There was a heavy blow on the door behind him. He wasn’t expecting it. He jolted forward into the room and the door slammed back against the wall. What looked like a tide of black uniforms poured through, Lewis at the front, his granite face set, his eyes like steel on mine.

“Want to ask you some questions, Owen,” he began. “We have reason to think you know more than—”

Then he saw what lay across the desk behind me. There was an instant of absolute silence in the room. Davidson had been hurled past me by the slamming open of the door and the



first sound I heard was his gasp of in-taken breath as he leaned over the chair from which I'd risen.

My mind was perfectly blank. I knew it was desperately imperative that I clear myself but I'd had too many shocks, one on another, all that day. My brain just wasn't working any more.

I had to say something. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth, praying for the right words.

Davidson's hand closed on my arm. It was a hard, violent grasp, but very quickly, before his next move, he pressed my biceps three times, rapid, warning squeezes. Then he completed his motion and hurled me aside so hard I staggered three paces across the rug and came up facing him, stupid with surprise.

He had scooped up the revolver which I had dropped in my chair. I saw his fingers move over the butt as if for a firmer grip. But I knew what he was doing. His prints would have effaced mine when the time came to test it.

"All right, Lewis," he said quietly. "I did it. I shot them both." His glance shifted from face to face. When it crossed mine I recognized the desperate appeal in his eyes. It was up to me. I couldn't refuse this last offer of aid from him, in the service of a cause greater than any cause men ever fought for.

*I knew the truth of that as I knew my own name. There could be no greater cause than the protection of the lake.*

A look of wildness which I knew was deliberate suddenly convulsed his face. He lifted the revolver and fired straight at me.

**E**XCEPT—it wasn't straight. Davidson was a good shot. He couldn't miss at this range unless he meant to. The bullet sang past my ear and shattered something noisy behind me. And I saw the look of deep satisfaction relax his face an in-

stant before Lewis' bullet smashed into it, erasing his features in a crimson blur.

(He had to fire the gun at someone—I think he remembered that wax-tests would otherwise prove he hadn't fired one recently. And it might as well be at me, to clear me of suspicion. Perhaps too he knew he couldn't make his story stand under close questioning. So it was suicide, in a way, but suicide in a cause of tremendous, unquestionable rightness. That I knew in the deepest recesses of my mind.)...

"All right, Owen. You give the word. Where would you say it's most vulnerable?" Was Lewis watching me with irony in his keen eyes as he asked it? For that question of all others was the one I could not answer. Physically could not, even had I wished. I think my tongue would have turned backward in my throat and strangled me, if need be, before I could tell them the truth.

"Make another circle," I said. "I'll look it over once more."

Five hundred feet below us the lake lay blue and placid. Seen from this height the majestic cliffs above it were foreshortened into insignificance, but I knew that deep beneath those rocks lay the vital cavern which no bombs must touch.

There was no sign of the mindless men and women which It had used and discarded. The antitoxin premise was no longer valid. But the next step, to a bacteriophage which would seek out and devour the virus of attack—that must not fail. I well knew what my task was.

"Try the shallows over here," I said, pointing. The ship circled and Lewis presently raised his hand.

The depth-bombs floated away behind us in a long, falling drift. They were not, I knew, merely depth bombs. Sales' memorandum had worked its recorder's will too fast for me. I had silenced the doctor but I could not silence the records. I watched the fall-

ing bombs with a sickness in my heart that was near despair.

"The Organism has no white blood-cells," Sales had reported to the Staff, his dead voice speaking the words of my own destruction in the very moment I killed him. "I believe it can be eradicated if we infect it thoroughly with a culture of every microbe and bacterium we can pour into it. The chances are something will take hold.

"If it doesn't, then we'll have to try until something does. I would suggest depth bombs. What tests I have made so far indicate the so-called water of the lake is in effect a thick skin which has so far protected the Organism from the entry of ordinary infection.

"The depth charges would serve the purpose of a hypodermic needle in introducing our weapons where they may take effect. Down there under the surface *something* must lie which is the heart of the dangerous being, something we have not yet seen. But destroy it we must, before it mutates any further, into a thing nothing could cope with."

When the first bombs burst, they might have been bursting in my own brain. Only dimly I saw the blue water fountain toward us.

We circled, watching. The water poured itself over that terrible wound. Ripples ran sluggishly out around it toward shore. It seemed to me there was a flush in the water where those death-laden charges had fallen, but if there was, something working in the lake effaced it, washed out the toxins, healed and soothed the danger away.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where next, Owen?" Lewis demanded relentlessly and I knew my ordeal had only begun. Desperation was welling up in me. How long could I drag this out? Sooner or later we would work our way around to the danger-area and this helpless being below us would die in an unimaginable agony—unimaginable to all but myself.

"Try over there," I said, pointing at

random, seeing my hand shake as I held it out. I shut the fingers into a fist to stop their trembling.

How long it went on I could not remember afterward. There comes a point when flesh and blood can record no further and, mercifully for me, I reached that point after a while. By then I knew what the end must be, no matter how long I postponed it. I had done what a man could but it wasn't enough. The lake and I were helpless together and I knew—it was soothing to be sure—that we would in the end die together.

**R**OUND after round we made above the shuddering blue water. Charge after charge dropped, splashed, vanished, fountained up again. From shore to shore the lake was racked by interlocking ripples from those dreadful wounds. Sometimes the poisons the bombs carried were washed out and dissolved, but as time went on, more and more often they started great spreading circles of infection that traced iridescence upon the water.

Yellow virulence rippled shoreward and crossed ripples running from circles of angry crimson. The color of bruises mingled with the color of blood and the shuddering lake shivered no more than I, but in me it was a hidden shuddering. It had to be hidden.

At least it wasn't I who pointed out the heart of the lake. That happened by sheer accident. It had to come sooner or later and after a long while it came.

Deep under the cliffs that shadowy blue cavern which I had never seen was riven asunder by a burst of white fire. And that which lay coiled in it was riven too, blinded and agonized by the tearing of the explosion and the quick avid onslaught of the disease it could not fight.

The first we saw from above was the ominous shadow suddenly uncoiling from beneath the cliff. It lashed



out like a gigantic serpent, a Midgard Serpent that clasped the world in its embrace. Convulsively it unwound itself from that shadowed cavern and burst into the open in an agonized series of spasms that made the lake boil around it.

The men around me broke into a hoarse, triumphant shouting. If I could have done it I would have killed them all. But it was hopeless now. I had no longer even the will to revenge. When a man's basic instinct dies within him he ceases intrinsically to be a man at all.

The water frothed and boiled beneath us. We lost sight of whatever it was that lashed the lake in its death-frenzy. I knew but I would not look or think. I had failed and I was ready now for death along with my dying master.

Very dimly I heard Lewis giving orders for the whole area to be bombed systematically to wipe out any lingering vestiges of the thing which had died here. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

I was an automaton, going through the motions of a man until I could shut them out at last and take from my locked file drawer a little revolver I kept there. In a way I envied Davidson. He at least had died for a purpose, trusting me to make his sacrifice not in vain.

I had failed him, too. I had failed myself.

I had no more reason to live.

I put the muzzle of the revolver against my head.

And then—and then I found I could not pull the trigger! Something stopped me, some deep command in a level of the mind below conscious recognition. For an instant of frantic hope

my reason tried to tell me that it was all a mistake, that there had not, after all, been wrought upon me that change which turned me from a human to an instrument in the command of another will.

Was it self-preservation, after all, that stayed my hand? If I had that I was free.

No—it was no self-preservation. In the next instant I knew and for one immeasurable moment the hope I had so briefly cherished flickered and then went out and was swallowed up in a great surge of command.

*It* was not dead. *It* lay far down in subterranean waters, buried, waiting, depending upon me, commanding me to stay the hand that would destroy it with me. I must live. I must serve it.

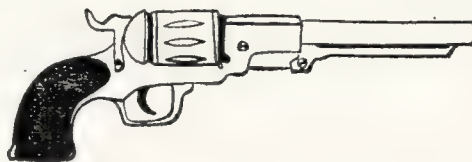
One deep wave of sick regret swept me in those levels of the mind where human reason dwelt. *If only I had pulled the trigger an instant sooner, before that command came!*

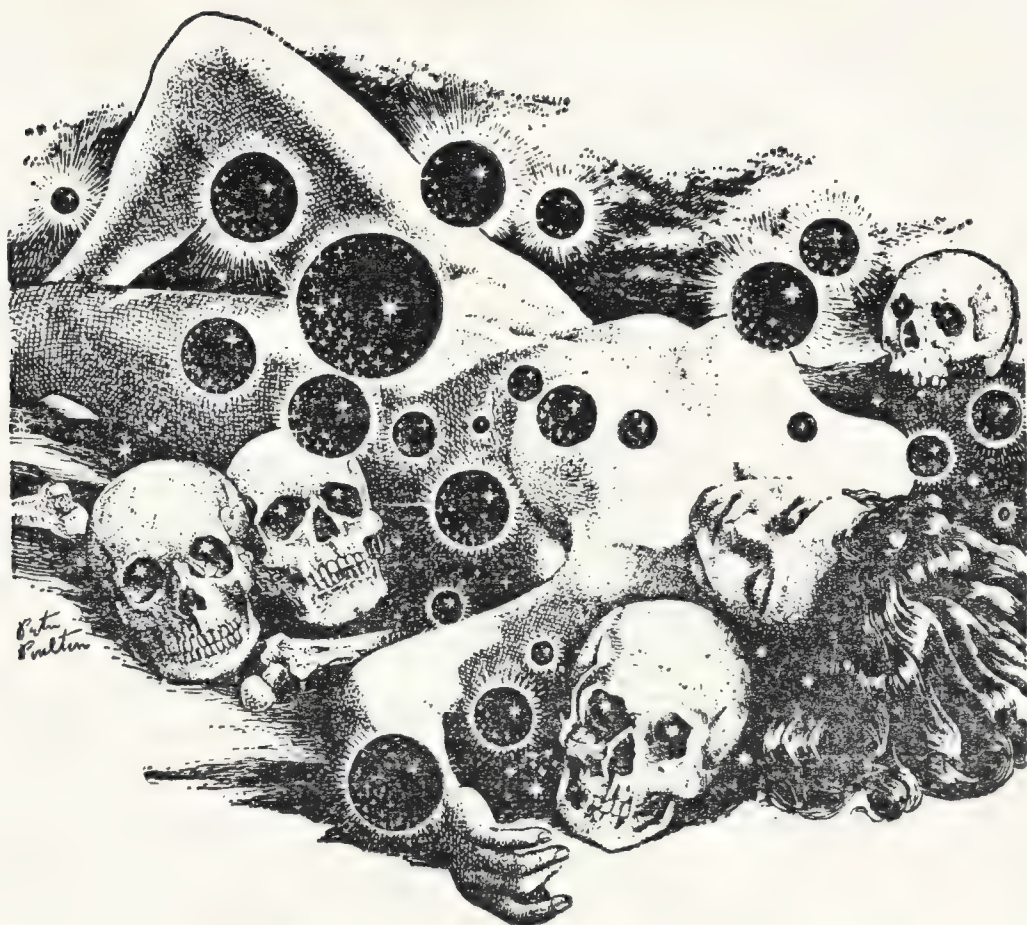
It was too late. And now a warm, confident cunning began to well into my mind from that far-away source of command. *It* could wait. *I* could wait. I could recruit where I must and I would help me to make others like myself, until our ranks were strong enough.

I had not wholly failed but until I fulfilled my duty I must obey. Obedience would be a pleasure and a joy, the insidious voice promised me. Good and faithful servant, the whisper said, work for my kingdom upon Earth and your rewards will be delightful beyond imagination.

I got up and locked the revolver away again. Turning back, I caught my reflection in a mirror on the wall and paused, staring deep into my own eyes.

I smiled. . . .





# Remembrance Of Things To Come

By WILLIAM RATIGAN

*They stepped backward  
to go forward....*

WHEN we were kids, only a few of the skeletons remained in our corner of New Mexico. The majority had been carried away. Each Independence Day the grown-ups came from miles around to tug and tussle one of them onto as many as ten wagons lashed together to carry the load.

It's a long time ago, and we were kept at a distance, but I remember the peculiar blend of patriotic celebration and religious ritual. Psalms and hard cider ruled the day, climaxed by the halleluyah-hoorah when the teamsters cracked their bullwhips, the oxen strained at their yokes, and

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the wagon wheels creaked and rolled to the westward.

I still remember Great Grandfather in the black homespun of a Village Elder, rooted in the center of the road, shaking a fist like a tree stump, his patriarchal beard bristling below fierce blue eyes. And, as the red dust rose behind the wagon wheels, so did his voice, until it crackled and drew a response from buckskin and calico alike. "Rust is the blood! Rust is the blood! Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!"

My Father and Simon Black, their faces blank, always stood apart from the crowd, talking in whispers. I had the curious impression that they were reluctant to see the skeletons go.

Once, on a double-dare, three of our gang, rustling like mice through the wheat because it was forbidden to look closely at the monsters, crept almost to where we could touch the one in Caleb Shard's field. We saw nothing to alarm us—nothing really—but we never went there any more.

Maybe it was because so many grown-ups made the sign of the cross when they passed nearby and maybe it was because of conversations overheard when we were supposed to be asleep. We traded clues and spent wild guesses, as we did about the mysteries of sex, only without the snickers.

**O**UR log cabin had no windows, but a westering August sun slanted through a doorway and onto the table where Mother set the cake the day I blew out sixteen candles . . . and my boyhood. She gave me a kiss for love and a Bible for book learning. My Father's gift was a hunting knife, hammered into shape at his forge.

Great Grandfather climbed down from the loft with a man-sized bow. I tested the pull.

"You'll be bending it double and

sending an arrow clean through a bison in another year," he said.

My Father, like most blacksmiths, had the reputation of being an easy-going, peaceful man. He startled us by growling: "If it weren't for fanatics like you, the world would have something better than an Indian weapon!"

Great Grandfather said things might be worse, if a certain element had contral. "For instance, I understand you helped Simon Black make another loom for his wife and daughters."

"What of it?" snapped my Father. "Hand looms are legal."

"There's a difference between the letter of the law and the spirit. Now just suppose. . ."

"We don't need to suppose"—and my Father's brows were thunderclouds—"We know you sentenced your own son, my Father, to death!"

I heard Mother's apron-stifled gasp, saw pain blink Great Grandfather's eyes.

That was all I heard. They banished me outdoors and the storm of words faded as my bare toes dug into the warm dust on the river path.

My favorite spot was a grassy knoll where I could lean on my elbows and watch the water boil across the rocks. I forgot about grownup arguments and hugged a secret to my heart. It had to do with a time when I would harness the river as my Father harnessed horses, and put it to work so my mother could rest.

Oh, I had dreams! And there was more than the river in them. There was a blaze of the sun and the drive of the wind, and fantastic forces that wrought a pageant of miracles.

I don't know how long Great Grandfather had been there beside me. He could not have known what I was thinking, but he said: "You can't do it"—and his eyes were blue scars.

Somehow the grownup quarrel had



been patched up because I was allowed to go West with him on the stagecoach that evening. My first trip—three days of hair-breadth lurches on curves and breakneck speed down canyons. Great Grandfather seemed in a joking mood. How I laughed when he spoke of once going the same distance in three hours.

The Grand Canyon was our stopping point. I had been told that all my questions would be answered there. We arrived at the Red Mule Tavern late at night, hired cow ponies the next morning and rode to the rim. A pitiless sun searched the walls and chasms. I sucked in my breath.

**B**ELOW, and stretching as far as the eye could reach, were the skeletons, battalions and armies of them, forests and oceans—a graveyard of giants. I stood on an umbrella-rock, staring until my knees faltered.

"Rust is the blood," said Great Grandfather, sitting beside me. "Their bones won't bleach."

He began the story. It took all day because so many of his expressions had to be explained to me. It took all day, but I never grew hungry, never felt thirst.

"In what are now known as the Dark Ages," said Great Grandfather, "we did what you were dreaming about there at the river. We harnessed running water, we chained the lightning, captured the wind, commanded the universe to do our bidding. We thought we were the masters—we learned we were slaves. The machines robbed us of jobs, our lives. They caused depressions, drove us to war."

Great Grandfather was in his late teens when the revolutionary movement started in a world smashed by wars and loss of religious faith. A descendant of Henry Ward Beecher thundered the keynote from his pulpit: "The machines, not the men, are the enemy. Thou shalt not worship

false images. Moses shattered the Golden Calf. We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord."

Outbreaks followed, girdling the globe. In New York, office employees dropped typewriters and comptometers from skyscrapers. Workers on a production line in Detroit went berserk. London housewives raided department stores with hammers.

"It grew into a crusade," said Great Grandfather. "National differences were forgotten as we battled the common enemy—the machines. We smashed the smaller ones. Larger sizes we killed by taking off their safety valves."

I looked out over the battlefield of rust and wondered. I pictured slaughtered hosts of mechanized dragons, and Towers of Babel, called cities, struck with a confusion of tongues. And I saw the ghosts of horseless carriages and winged chariots.

"It cost us," said Great Grandfather. "Millions of people were unable to survive without their machines. Some tried to rebuild them. Your own grandfather turned traitor. As an Elder I signed his death warrant."

I looked out over the graveyard of machines that dwarfed imagination. The rust was blood.

Great Grandfather's wounded eyes probed my face for the thoughts that dwelt underneath. "We went to extremes. We turned back time to sundials and candle notches. But there was no other way. You can see what would have happened if we hadn't done what we did?"

And I could see...

But I remembered how my Father and Simon Black had stood away from the crowd on Independence Day, and I knew I would stand with them from now on, and I thought we could make it work.

The rust could be removed. And the blood.

This time would be different...









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